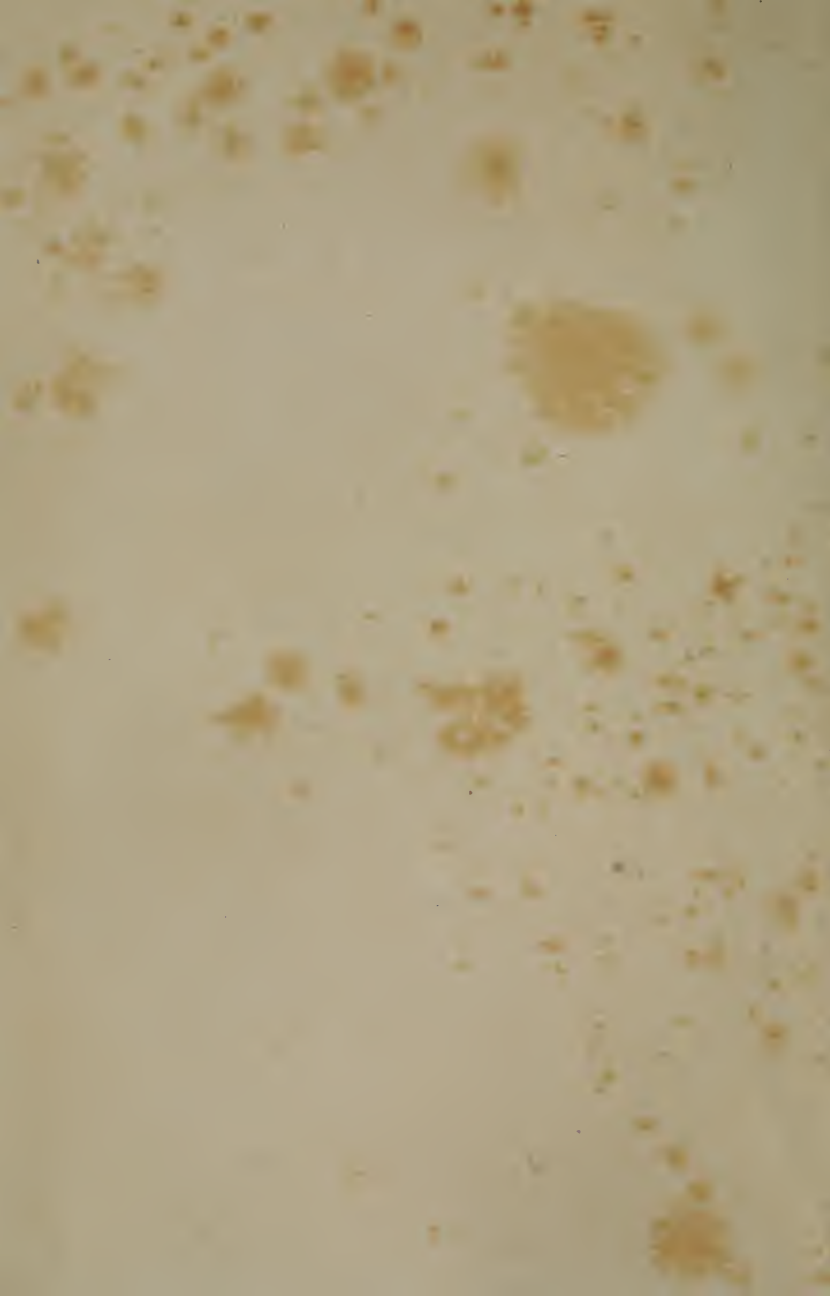


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ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

A NOVEL.

BY

EDITH STEWART DREWRY,

AUTHOR OF "A DEATH RING," "SWORN FOES," "BAPTISED
WITH A CURSE," "TWO FLOWERS," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

CHAPTER I.

MY SISTER, MY SWEET SISTER.

SO it is all over, the roses and the thorns, the pleasure and the pain. Over! Is it all over? If some of the roses are fadeless, are the thorns dead? If the pleasure still lives through the days that follow, is the pain gone from beating, aching hearts? I trow not so soon. Rose Neville, with the quiet, tender insight of her tender, loving, woman's heart, could have pointed to two

at least within that stately Hall into whose souls the thorns had struck too deep to be rooted out ; she could have touched her own brother one evening as he paced to and fro the room with slow step and sombre brow, and said, "The thorns and the rose grow together there."

"I wish you had been at home this afternoon, my dear," she said, presently ; "for I had two such charming visitors."

Chandos paused by her, dropping his hand with a caressing action on her shoulder.

"Who was that, dear Rose *sans épines?*"

"Two ladies on horseback, attended by Marston—guess—"

"Mrs Albany !"

"Yes, on Hassan ; and who else ?"

"I don't know, Rose. Did they dismount ?"

"Oh yes, and had a chat ; took this in in a two hours' ride. Well, the other lady was Hyacinth Lee."

Neville dropped his hand abruptly.

“Hyacinth Lee *here*, sister Rose!”

“Certainly, my dear; and disappointed because you were out.”

His cheek flushed, his hazel eyes sparkled for a moment, then both the flush and the light died out.

“It was kind of her to say so, Rose; but she—I am glad I was out.”

Rose was not like Gabrielle Albany, she was no Jesuit—she was not subtle, she could not fence or go very far round to gain an object near her heart. She could be silent or speak straight to reach that object, and now she lifted those clear, tender, brown eyes to his face.

“Chandos, Chandos, you cannot deceive me! My dear, do you think I do not know your heart?”

Neville swung round sharply, walked to the end of the room, came back, and stopped before her.

“I suppose you do, Rose. You know,

then, what a mad fool I am to love one I may never, never, even try to win."

"Never! Why not Chandos?" very quietly, very composedly asked. "You cannot think, believe Lady Glen-Luna's fancy, and Lady Constance's secret hopes well founded, that Hyacinth cares for Douglas; or, still more, that he is any one's rival there"—her face saddened—"his life, I fear, is laid at very different feet, poor hearts! Why, then, can you never even try to win the heart which won yours?"

"Why not?" The haughty blood dyed his very brow now. "Because, Rose, if that were all fancy—and I fear for his sake and Gabrielle's that you are right—between us there stands a mountain of gold. I am what I am, and Hyacinth Lee is an heiress."

"Well, my dear, she is still a woman, with a woman's heart to be won," said Sister Rose, looking up with her sweet, gentle smile.

"Rose, am I turned craven — without

pride or honour? Do you think I, Chandos Neville, would give the world, and, still more, Hyacinth herself, the chance, the right, to deem me seeking her for her gold? Never."

The touch that rarely failed to soothe passion or pain was laid on his arm now.

"'Physician heal thyself,' you, so wise for others, be a little wise for yourself. You have seen her constantly now for weeks, and you cannot but see that she likes your society. I know nothing of her heart or feelings, and therefore I am betraying no confidences; but Hyacinth, though not a woman of the world like Gabrielle, is still four-and-twenty, has lived in society the object of attention since she was eighteen, and she is no woman if she cannot tell when a man is attracted by her herself, however he may veil his heart from other's gaze, and I think that if Hyacinth Lee had judged you a man who could sink to be a fortune-hunter, she would have found means, as a

woman can, to let you feel yourself unwelcome, as she has of others."

"Rose, oh Rose! don't tempt me! don't fight against my honour, darling sister, in your love for me!" he said hoarsely.

"Hush, dearest, I do not; when did you ever know my love blind? I would not have a mistaken sense of honour blind those you love for one worthy of even you, that is all, Chandos. You have no right, remember, to wreck your life and hers, if she has learned to care for you, for a mistaken pride and fancied honour. If she learns to love you she will read you right; nay, I know she does that already, and for what the world may say, why a Neville would never be coward enough to forsake a woman for what the world might say."

"Never; but still, still, Rose, Rose," he locked his sister's hands in his own now, "I cannot bring myself to do it! to try even. I dare not hope! If I could leave this place I would, but I cannot till Douglas is able to

be moved. No, I must fight the battle out here."

"Go on simply as you have done hitherto," said gentle, judicious Rose, quietly leaving the seed she had sown to take root and grow, "let all else rest now, and forgive Sister Rose her lecture."

"Forgive!" Chandos folded her in his arms close. "It is I who need your forgiveness every hour. God bless thee for ever, Sister Rose!"





CHAPTER II.

AN UNWELCOME MEETING.

THERE had been a driving party that morning, and in the afternoon most of the guests had remained indoors playing billiards, or otherwise amusing themselves. Hyacinth Lee, however, had by chance met Mrs Albany in one of the corridors, and learned that she was going out riding for a couple of hours, and to call on Miss Neville. Mr Glen-Luna had insisted on her not remaining in the whole of such a lovely afternoon. Hyacinth looked so wistful that Gabrielle smiled and asked her to join her, if the

others would spare her such a *charmante* companion."

"I shall slip off," cried Hyacinth, as she ran off, "and just tell mamma that I am out with you."

Thus it was that Sister Rose's quiet afternoon was enlivened by the two visitors of whom she had told her brother.

They had taken The Cedars on the homeward route, and it was near five when they remounted. Just, however, as they had almost reached the park gates, Hyacinth suddenly drew rein with a blank face.

"There! What a stupid, heedless memory I've got!" she exclaimed; and Hassan, checked too by his rider, pawed the ground impatiently, "I promised mamma I would match her embroidery silks in Doring; I know the shades. Haven't we time to go back? I must get them for her, Mrs Albany."

"It is easily managed," said Gabrielle, smiling, "I must ride on, because I have

left Mr Glen-Luna so long, and, besides, we dine earlier to-day ; but you can easily ride back with Marston, of course, and buy your silks—a long job, I know.”

“ But, no, no, to let you ride back alone.”

Gabrielle laughed, with something of a ring of bitterness through the amused surprise.

“ Not ride alone ! Why not ? The conventionalities, if that is what you mean, trouble me not a bit. I am too Bohemian for that, and I have ridden alone where I tell you I should have been thankful for such a guardian as Angus here ; so turn back, and be quite easy about me. Marston ! ”

“ Yes, madam.” Marston came up to his mistress to receive her order, and the two fair equestrians parted company ; Hyacinth turned back towards Doring, attended by the groom, who secretly wondered what his master would say if the Arab took to be “ skeery,” and Gabrielle Albany, followed

by Angus, rode through the gates and struck across the rich soft turf of the park at an easy canter, the beautiful Arab lifting his delicate hoofs with the dainty dancing step of the true denizen of the desert ; but when she had got to a thicket of trees about half way between the lodge and the Hall, Hassan's rider made the discovery that one of the saddle girths was loose. Many ladies would have been somewhat at a *non plus* at such a discovery, but Gabrielle in a moment had drawn rein, dismounted, and, with the bridle over her arm, proceeded to tighten the girth again, the Arab turning his head to see what she was about, and Angus, for dogs are very curious, watching her with the most inquiring expression.

"There, Hassan, it's all right now," she said, caressing the beautiful animal, and still holding the bridle, "stand still while I mount."

But before she could put her foot in the stirrup for the spring the dog suddenly gave

a growl, there was the crash of footsteps over the fallen leaves, and a tall man's figure stood before her—her husband.

If for one moment the blood almost left her lips, it was not from physical fear ; the dog was at her side ; if she receded a step and shrank back closer to the Arab with a look of intense horror, it was from exactly the same feeling that the sudden presence of some loathsome reptile would have given her. For that second there was dead stillness, and then Albany broke it,—

“Well met,” he said, with that sneer which came most readily to his lips, “I had hardly looked for such luck when I strayed this way ; you are so very attentive to your—”

“What you have to say”—she interrupted him so sternly, that even his bold eyes quailed a moment—“say quickly, and without insult ; if, indeed, such foul lips as yours can address the wife whose honour you would have sold, without insult. *Basta !*

I care not for your frown or oath. Shall I tell you what you would say ? ”

“ Gabrielle ! ”

Without moving from her attitude of superb and graceful repose, that seemed to scorn even the attempt to shun him, without once dropping her steady gaze, she took him up there.

“ You would sound how far I am cognisant of the progress of your admirable matrimonial scheme, how far I may be held under the sword of Damocles ; you fancy perhaps, that there may, must, be in me some spark of the sentiment which you imagine wifehood itself must feel at seeing another put where she had been ; but, whether you planned or built upon the existence of such a sentiment matters not, it is equally a chimera. For that there must at least be some remnant of a sense of moral obligation left, and I have none, for you, yourself long ago snapped asunder the very last frail thread of *that* ; perhaps

even there must be some memory of having once loved, and I, never—”

“Hold !” Leicester broke in, passion and vanity stung to the quick. “When that evening, which you cannot forget, I held you to my breast, you loved me then, child scarce sixteen though you were.”

“Never, Leicester Albany, and you know it ; I never loved you, child or woman, maiden or wedded wife, in all the seven years I lived with you, from the cursed hour in which, maddened by cruel injustice, I fled with you, to the day I fled from you !”

“Do you think I don’t know what all this means,” said Leicester, with a fierce sneer, “when you are mounted on his own horse ; his very dog follows you as himself, and his servants treat you as their mistress ! Death. Do you think I am blind ?”

The taunt was so cowardly, the insult so unmanly, that it missed its point ; this was

a thing far beneath the passion of indignation, below even contempt, its venom must simply be drawn as the snake-charmer cuts out the poison of the reptile he masters.

“You are true still to yourself, Leicester Albany, but one more such word as that and I will at once claim Sir Arthur’s protection against the insult of his guest, Mr Clifford Brandon ; even such a poor infatuated fool as the girl you have entrapped would break, I fancy, with a lover guilty of such gross breach of hospitality, even if her jealousy were not roused.”

“You dare not,” said Leicester, furiously.
“You dare not do it—”

“I warn you,” she said, with a flash in her dark eyes that he knew of old, “not to drive me too far. Dare *not* is a word my category of language does not know ; dare *all* is, as you will learn to your cost, if you drive me to turn to bay.”

There was a minute’s pause. In her armour of steel there was one vulnerable

point, if her deadly enemy had known how to reach it—the safety of the man she loved, the very secret of that love itself. That her husband's worst jealousy fancied this she saw, and that to guard against an attack from which her very heart of woman shrank, ay, and for the very end for which she played, she must act out a fear of him, feign a dread of the powerful threat he held over her, which had no real existence in her. She must let him believe that he had forced her from her vow to foil him—that she was obliged to allow his scheme to culminate in a marriage with Jessie Glen-Luna.

She broke that pause, moving her right hand to the pommel as if about to mount, but otherwise with no change of attitude, and with none of look, or tone, or manner.

“When we met that night in the park there was a threat on your part, worthy of your base nature, under which a certain

tacit truce was entered into between us, and an armed neutrality understood. The keynote of that truce was that we were to meet as strangers,—that you should go your way and I mine. I have kept to that bargain, but you, in this hour, have broken it, and again I warn you against so doing. You vowed that if I betray your true name you will swear I was your mistress, and from that I shrank ; but, remember this, that if ever you drive me to that, if ever you succeed in so dragging me down at last, by the heaven above, I will not fall alone !”

Albany fell back a pace with something of absolute fear and awe in his gaze ; the woman was sublime in her declaration of vengeance, magnificent in her splendid scorn.

She tightened her grasp on the pommel, put her foot in the stirrup, and before Albany could move, was in the saddle.

“ Gabrielle !—”

The word came almost under his breath

as he made one step forward, but she reined back the mettlesome Arab.

“Stand back, and remember my warning.” The next moment horse, rider, and dog were gone, and Leicester Albany stood alone in the wood.





CHAPTER III.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES.

LEFT alone on the ground for which he was playing so dark and desperate a game, Leicester Albany stood watching the rapidly retreating form of that graceful rider with a very maelstrom of mad, contending passions within, through which there struggled a vague uneasy sense, rather than feeling, that, despite the power he held over her, she would somehow in the end be master. The thirst for the gold, which alone could minister to his vices, fury, jealousy, passion, hatred, all and at once had possession of the man like a pack of demons, a flash up of

the old passion aroused by her superb beauty, side by side with a fierce hatred, deepened by fear, of the woman who, calmly—like a rock—unmoved alike by threats or bribe of freedom, stood an immovable obstacle to the safe consummation of his schemes, deliberately disavowing any moral obligation; the remotest remnant of even wifely sentiment, or any tie whatsoever except the one indissoluble chain which legally held them both. She was just his wife enough to prevent him, as she had said, “wrecking another life,” but she had wrenched from him the very last legal right of husband which he once had possessed. It is an integral and one of the most repulsive parts of such a character as this, to covet most that which it has not, plays with it when gained only as long as it has novelty, toss it aside, and then, when lost irremediably, and gathered up by other hands, want it back again with tenfold force. So now was it in some degree,

despite his fancy for pretty, witching Jessie. He had been madly in love with Gabrielle, and he had cared for her more deeply and far longer than he ever had for any one before or since ; indeed, she had, in fact, never to the last entirely lost her sway over him. There are some rare women who, not by any will or effort of their own, but simply because they cannot help it, never entirely lose a hold once yielded them ; and Gabrielle was one of these. How he had treated her we have seen, but her beauty came fresh again, after two years' absence, since, too, he had lost her, and another cared for her, ay, surely must love her, and she him ; and the mere thought, the bare possibility, fired the debased nature with jealousy and that gleam of the former passion which linked itself to his hate and fear of her scornful master spirit. If she had never loved him—and the truth of that stung him more than all—she had never, in all those miserable years

loved any other; those he flung her amongst could not touch such a heart of gold; but Douglas, the man felt instinctively, was quite of another mould; he was of Gabrielle's world just as much as he himself was *not*, and never had been; and Leicester Albany muttered a fierce oath to himself as he left the wooding, warned by the lengthening shadows that he should return to the Hall. His mind was made up to two things: to speak quickly to Jessie's mother and know how far the ground was dangerous, and how far safe; and to sound and find out if certain suspicions of his about that lady's motive in placing Mrs Albany about her stepson were correct, for he had understood from Jessie that the proposition had come from her mother, and Lady Glen-Luna's great show of affection for Douglas had not entirely deceived him, though he by no means fathomed her yet. For Gabrielle she was no match, but for Leicester she was, though a certain subtle,

nameless affinity of evil quickly made them gravitate towards each other.

As he neared the lawn—for he had skirted round to that side—he saw the very person he was thinking of seated on a rustic bench under a spreading tree. Hearing a step, she looked up.

“*You*, Mr Brandon!” she exclaimed, giving him her hand. “Where do you come from?”

“Shall I say from going to and fro in the world?” asked Albany, seating himself at her side.

“Oh, fie!—that was *M. le Diable*, you know,” laughed Adeline; and Leicester bit his lip; he had probably a very hazy remembrance whether the phrase was to be found in the Bible or Shakespeare or one of the “Society” papers. He laughed, too, of course.

“So it is. I strolled out and wandered on. By the way, I met Mrs Albany, too, mounted on that splendid Arab.”

“Hassan, Yes ; dear Douglas likes her to ride his horse. But where was Miss Lee, for they rode out together ? ”

“ Indeed ! Well, certainly, Mrs Albany was quite alone, unless you can call that dog, Angus, a companion.”

“ Horrid brute ! ” said her ladyship. “ They call it one, and talk of it as if it were a human being. Was she riding home ? She never leaves Douglas long alone.”

“ Oh, yes ; she said he would be expecting her.”

“ Dear boy ! ” purred Adeline. “ I am so glad the bright idea occurred to me of getting him a lady for a secretary and attendant. And you see how very lucky was my choice ; if we could have had some one made for the position, we could hardly have done better.”

“ No ? ”—a little query artfully thrown into the tone of the monosyllable. “ But, pardon me, dear Lady Glen-Luna, you have honoured me with so much of your friendship—” He stopped.

“Go on, Mr Brandon, please. I count you indeed a friend—you saved my child’s life. Please go on.”

“Dear Lady Glen-Luna, I was only going to ask if it was quite a wise step ; for which of us,” with a half sigh, “can answer for our heart ?”

She glanced sharply, furtively at him, and said, tapping her foot on the grass,—

“Of course—that is too true ; but you see something had to be done, and he could not endure any one too old or plain or uneducated about him, on the one hand ; nor, on the other, was it a position which just any one of the ordinary stamp would take or keep. Of course, a young single lady was not possible, and widows are ten times worse. I did the best I could by getting a married woman who is separated from her husband, and one Bohemian enough not to care for any idle gossip or chatter of town or country. Beyond that—why, really, Mr Brandon, it is impossible to foresee or guard

against every contingency, isn't it? Oh, I think my boy's heart is safe enough, and Mrs Albany's, too. Only," she added, looking down with a sigh, "if he does care for her, or should, I fear that he would never marry at all, even if"—a little choke here—"if he lives, which—which—"

She covered her face, but Albany had learned what he wanted to know—her motive in placing a being so attractive as his wife about the heir of Glen-Luna. Like a flash the evil nature read the kindred evil, his wit filling the gap; there had, he thought, been some particular marriage which she had feared, perhaps that very Hyacinth Lee, who flirted in a kind of manner alike with himself and Douglas or Dr Neville. Her acting did not deceive him now, though he had sometimes before this been puzzled as to whether the "affection" was absolutely all false. Bah! of course; what a fool he was; did not Douglas's life stand between her daughter and an inheritance,

how could she do ought but hate him and wish him dead, and chafe that he lingered on so, with not much apparent intention either of dying yet?

“Dear Lady Glen-Luna,” he said, gently drawing her hands into his own, “do not grieve so—try to hope he may be spared! Heaven! What should I feel who am the cause, however innocently, of this terrible wreck, if it ends fatally!”

“Sometimes,” she whispered with a half sob, “it comes over me so terribly—please forgive my stupid weakness—and I try to hope he is better, and then, when I ask Dr Neville, he looks grave and strange, and won’t say much”—sobbing a little more now,—“and only this morning he was so tired just with that drive that dear Mrs Albany was quite anxious, and would not let him move again to-day.”

How “dear Mrs Albany” would have laughed if the Dryads in the wood behind could have repeated those words to her;

how she would have shrugged her shoulders and said again, "*Populus vult decipi, decipiatur.*"

"Is there, then, in grave earnest, so little hope?" said Albany, after a pause. "Douglas does not look to me to be ill; you must not meet an evil so half way, dearest Lady Glen-Luna, and alarm yourself, perhaps, after all, needlessly. Indeed, I cannot bear to see *you* so distressed."

"You are very kind to say so—"

"Kind to you, the mother of—" Albany stopped as if he had said too much, "pardon me, I never meant to startle you—to be so abrupt," he added, as she looked up quickly, "but I only watched for an opportunity to speak to you as a gentleman and a man of honour should. You must have guessed, seen, that I love your daughter Jessie."

"I know it," said Adeline, in a low voice.

"Ay, twenty years older than her though I am, I have dared to love her !

How could mortal man help it! And oh, Lady Glen-Luna, blame me if you will, for I deserve it, but my love has carried me beyond myself—I confessed all to her the night of the ball.”

“I guessed that, too, Mr Brandon,” said Adeline—her thin, fair hands were twisting her chain restlessly—“I guessed that.”

“And did not banish me?” he said, eagerly clasping her hand. “You do not, then—will not—refuse me when I tell you that her heart is mine; you will not keep me in suspense; you all know what I am, who I am! I need hardly say that all I have is in your hands, that all her father could ask I will do for my darling—I may call her so?—and, though I have no title, no great rank or position, to offer one so well fitted for both, I have ancient lineage and a fortune to lay at her feet, which is not unworthy of a Glen-Luna’s daughter.

This, for which Lady Glen-Luna had invited him there, was at her feet. She

turned and looked him full in the face with those now glittering, serpent eyes of hers, gazed at him steadily, to be met by gaze as unflinching, as keen ; if there is a *rapport* between the loyal and brave, so is there also between the base and wicked ; if there is a fraternity of the pure in heart, so also is there a brotherhood of Cain ; and in that intense, in that long, deep look, each of those two read the other, if not to the full, at least enough to know that each might set the first step on the dangerous ground between them and meet half way with clasped hands. The woman felt that her thought days ago was not at fault ; that here she had found the instrument she coveted ; the man knew that she had one hope, one end, for which she would willingly make her daughter the price.

“Clifford Brandon,” she said, then, dropping her eyes with a smile, “there is no one to whom I would sooner give Jessie than the man who saved her precious life.

Who weds her does so for herself alone, for she will bring to her husband little of fortune save her own heart as long as her dear brother is spared, and *that*, Heaven knows, we hope will be long—long—”

The last words fell slowly, sadly, as if the mere thought of his death was pain. She added in another tone as she rose,—

“But at present let the matter rest between us three. I had rather, for reasons I will tell you another time, that neither Sir Arthur nor Douglas know of this yet.”

“One thing, dear Lady Glen-Luna, you fear opposition,” exclaimed Albany, quickly.

“I hardly know yet, Clifford. I must think; it is time if need be to speak before you leave. Bah! you impatient lover,” she added, playfully, “you will have enough of your ‘ladye fayre,’ wont you?”

“With such a friend at court as *you* are, yes,” he answered, kissing her hand, and then placing it on his arm, “and you will speak to Jessie?”

“ Yes, Ah, there ! that is the dressing-bell.”

And they quickened their steps as a gong sounded from the hall.

Was this a brotherhood of Cain ?





CHAPTER IV.

PHYSICIAN HEAL THYSELF.

IN the very centre of a rotatory storm there is, as seamen well know, practically a dead calm, in which they can see the tempest raging around, whilst themselves actually becalmed. So it is, for a time at any rate, with some lives.

Was something of such a comparison perhaps in Douglas Glen-Luna's thoughts that afternoon as he lay on his sofa, quite alone, the book laid aside or dropped from the hand; the eyes so drooped under the long heavy lashes, that a casual glance might have thought he slept, only that,

motionless as was the graceful form, still as were the chiselled features, there was not in one line of the face the merest shadow of that repose, that restfulness, which nearly always belongs to sleep, and lends to it such beauty?

Was he now, had he ever been, blind to the elements raging around him, to the warfare of which he was the centre? No, not from the first, not for one instant; but knowing all—as Gabrielle had said to Harford—he gave no sign.

Not over tired, however, as Adeline believed—not alone either the whole time, as Gabrielle thought; for, as he lay utterly wrapped in bitter, most painful thought, the door opened quietly, and Chandos Neville came in, catching at once, in the moment he entered, the whole expression of that attitude and face. *He* did not mistake stillness for sleep or repose, and took note of the start there was at the sound of his voice.

“What ! all alone, *mon cher* ? Where is Mrs Albany ? ”

“I made her go out for a couple of hours’ ride,” returned Douglas, as he clasped the physician’s hand.

“Hum,” said Neville, “and I find you buried in the very realms of Hades ; I shall scold Mrs Albany.”

“Scold Gabrielle ! No, no, Neville ! Please don’t say a word to her, I’m all right ; only I was a fool, and found myself in Hades before I knew it ; don’t tell her.”

“I expect she’ll find out for herself, my dear boy. Where is she gone, or with whom ? A party of them, I suppose—”

“No, only with Angus and Hyacinth Lee ; they took to each other from the first, those two ; indeed, I think that Hyacinth thinks there is nothing feminine like Gabrielle. They may perhaps call at your digging.”

“At the Cedars !” said Chandos quickly,

with a sudden flush, and then a look of pain which did not escape his friend, "my roof will be, indeed, honoured. Look here, Glen-Luna, your book has fallen."

He stooped to pick it up, and in so doing a sheet of paper slipped out from between the leaves; not a blank sheet, for in restoring it Neville caught sight of an exquisite, winsome face, which was all in all to him, and the blood flushed suddenly over his brow.

"Thanks," said Douglas, quietly receiving it, and holding it lightly in his fingers, "I sketched it this afternoon from memory. Look again. Like her, isn't it?"

Why had he sketched this face of all others? Why had he so naturally called her Hyacinth? Had Adeline's cruel scheme come too late, after all, and was this why—why—?

In that moment the eyes of the two men met, and there was dead stillness.

Then Glen-Luna said, very softly, with

that sweet tenderness that had so much of the woman in it,—

“Your fear, your thought, just sprung into life, dear Chandos, may die as quickly. It is not Hyacinth—I am not any man’s rival—I never shall be now.”

“Douglas!”

“Ay, it is not to be, that is all,” he said, in the same quiet way, “but for you the path is open. Dear Chandos, I knew that you loved her, and I could not wish either of you greater happiness.”

“Hush. Oh, hush, Douglas.” Neville covered his face for a minute, and his mellow voice was hoarse—“it is not for me! What would she herself think of me? how, why, should she deem me different to others who have sought the heiress of Lee’s-Folly?—not Hyacinth Lee.”

“Why should she?” repeated Glen-Luna. “Because she is a woman, with a woman’s heart.”

“You try to tempt me. Would you,

proudest of proud men, in my place so stoop your crest for the world—the girl herself—to deem you mercenary, to be rejected with scorn! It would be base dishonour to try and win her. I ask again, would you do it?”

“I’ll tell you when the case arises,” said Douglas, coolly, leaning back, “meanwhile I will try and prove the truth of Bulwer’s aphorism that ‘policy is the art of being wise for oneself; politics the art of being wise for others.’ The first I apply just now by silence; I am in exactly the opposite position to you, as poor Lady Constance has tried long ago, and still, I fancy, would give anything if Hyacinth and I would fall in love. For the second part of the aphorism, I will try to be wise for you—”

“Don’t, don’t Douglas! What is the use? I *cannot*—will not.”

Glen-Luna lifted himself on one arm, his whole face, so mobile, so expressive, changing to yet more intense earnestness.

“You are starting from the very outset, Chandos, on a false basis; a total undervaluing and misunderstanding of your position and Miss Lee’s. She is an heiress with some six thousand a-year, certainly; and if you were quite a young beginner in your profession, with no fortune at all, or only a few hundreds, I grant you the question would be widely different. But you are five-and-thirty; you have made a good position—won a reputation to which each day or month adds, both in fame and income, and it is no blindness of friendship—no idle prophecy—to say that you will certainly as years go on take a position that will rank you with the first of your profession. This case of mine alone, if it is successful—as in God’s mercy we hope it will be—will at once give you a step on the ladder of fame. Hear me out. Hear me out. You have private means which alone would place you beyond a wife’s fortune; you told me so yourself. Don’t you, won’t

you see that there is not the wide gap between your position and Hyacinth's as there would be, perhaps, I grant you, if she were a rich peer's heiress, or even such an heiress as Jessie will be at my death? I am speaking simply as a man of the world, and, as you say, as a proud man, and from that standpoint I say you have every right to try and win the woman you love, whether Lady Constance likes it or not. Hyacinth is not eighteen, but four-and-twenty, and as independent as she should be. The moral point of the matter I leave to your dear sister Rose, for there she is far more certain to go straight to the right point than you or I; women always do, and she in particular; though I might perhaps suggest the possibility that the 'winning' is done already."

"Douglas! no, no," Neville started, and dropped his hand, "God forgive me! I hope not!"

"I only suggest a possibility, Chandos;

men and women, after all, are still all human together, and women are often won unawares as much as men, only we show it and they cannot. The heart is heart whether of Adam or Eve. Whether or not that is so, whether you have the right for pride's sake to break her heart let your own or darling Rose decide. Chandos, forgive me if I have said too much for even friendship's sake ; but you know I am such a spoiled fellow that I believe I think I may say anything."

Neville grasped both those slender hands in his own.

"You may, indeed," he said hoarsely, "dear Douglas, dear old fellow ! how can I value enough such a friend as you are ? I will think over all you have said, and if I can—"

"*Ah, arrêtez vous là mon brave !*" exclaimed Glen-Luna, "I hate 'ifs' and will have none of them just now."

"Well, well ;" Neville was smiling now ; "since you have turned physician, and I

patient, I suppose I must obey and leave the 'if' to itself. Now, I must go, but don't you get back into Hades. Will Mrs Albany be long now?"

Glen-Luna glanced at his watch.

"She should be back now; she is sure not to be very long."

He was right, for even as he spoke the door was pushed open by Angus, who bounded in, leaping first on his master, then on Chandos, and the next minute Gabrielle followed; her usually colourless cheeks flushed a little, her eyes very bright, almost glittering, as Douglas noticed to himself.

"How do you do, Dr Neville? Not going are you? And how good to take my deserted post."

"You have been riding too hard, Gabrielle," said Douglas, "or has Hassan been—you don't look quite yourself, does she, Chandos?"

"Bah! *mon ami*, your fancy," she

answered, patting his head. "I've ridden at speed across the park, because I was late, that is all."

All! was it? He looked at her one second, and dropped his eyes.

Neville held out his hand to her,—

"Good-bye, then; I am off. Good-bye, Douglas."

And he went out; while Gabrielle, saying she would not be long, crossed to her room to dress for dinner, just as Harford entered to attend to his master.

Just about the same time Hyacinth reached the Hall, and ran off straight to her mother's room to deliver the silks before she dressed.

"There dear, aren't they just the thing?" said she. "I forgot them, so Gabrielle—Mrs Albany, you know—rode on with Angus, and I went back with Marston."

Lady Constance looked over the bright silks.

“ Good child ! they’re quite right. Where did you ride to ? ”

“ Oh, I hardly know ! right up to the lock ; and Mrs Albany, to show me Hassan’s surefootedness, crossed and re-crossed on the lock-gates without dismounting, and there’s only a rail on one side.”

“ I am afraid that Mrs Albany is rather fast,” said Lady Constance.

“ Poor dear mammy ! what a joke ! there was no one but myself and the old lock man to see her. Then we rode back through Doring, and called in on sweet Miss Neville ” (mamma frowned), “ only the doctor was out ” (mamma cleared up again) ; “ but,” added Miss Hyacinth, saucily, “ I met him just now in the park as he drove home, and had quite a chat ; jolly, wasn’t it ? ”

Poor Lady Constance ! round she swung,—

“ I think, Hyacinth, that the way you flirt with Dr Neville is quite beyond bounds, and will make you the talk of the place.”

“ Oh, no, mamma ! ‘ they’ve ’ got Mrs

Albany to cut up, and Jessie and Clifford Brandon to gossip over—”

“And now Miss Lee to link with a country doctor,” added Lady Constance.

Hyacinth fired up.

“He is a London physician of eminence, mamma, as you know, and a man of the highest character, and,” relapsing into her same saucy way again, “the only fellow here worth flirting with, except Douglas. I like him immensely. Ta, ta, I must dress.”

And then she ran off to her own room, locked the door, and, throwing herself on the bed, burst into a passion of tears. Poor little Hyacinth.





CHAPTER V.

TROUBLED WATERS.

“**M**ISS NEVILLE, Madam.”

“Show her in here, James.”

Mrs Albany was in her own sitting-room, and turned at once to meet her ever welcome visitor.

“Dear sister Rose! How good of you to come up this afternoon. I had just come in to look for a book of mine which Mr Douglas will like when he has finished what he is reading now. Give me your bonnet,” taking it off as she spoke, and kissing again the sweet, fair face; “but you look—shall I say vexed, sister Rose?”

—as if something had roused your indignation.”

“You are too keen, my dear; something has roused it thoroughly, then, and I think it is time, really, that Lady Glen-Luna took some notice of it, as she alone can.”

“Of what, sister Rose? What is the matter?”

How the poor heart, always on the *qui vive* for something painful, throbbed as she spoke.

“My dear,” said Miss Neville, more disturbed than ever Gabrielle had yet seen her, “I am more disgusted than I can express with the wicked, cruel gossip and scandal about you. I do not think that some of those women ever talk anything else but scandal of their neighbours. You smile, child; you think that is severe for me to say; but, as I walked up here just now, Mrs Winstanley and Mrs Chattaway were before me in the Doring high road, and

I could hear every word they said in the clear air."

"Dear sister Rose, please don't think or fret yourself about those silly, idle gossips; I do not care one bit."

"You would, then, Gabrielle, if you knew the worst they say—if you heard them just now."

"No more than they have said before, I dare say," Gabrielle said gently.

"Yes, it is." Rose Neville's indignation was not to be soothed; her own nature so recoiled from such base defamation of one of their own sex. "But you ought to know, because, if it goes on, it may make your position here untenable."

"Sister Rose, nothing can do that save Douglas Glen-Luna's own dismissal," said Gabrielle, steadily. "Tell me what they said, then, if you like; only I think I know."

"Did you know, then, my dear, that I heard them say—not as an *on dit* or a

possibility—but as an absolute fact, that you were never even married at all; that you and Mr Glen-Luna were abroad together long before his accident, and that your coming here was an arranged plan between you?”

Was this all? They had not said the truth, but, thank God, so wide, so very wide of it, that the relief was intense! She laughed slightly—a scornful laugh—and began pacing to and fro.

“It is too absurd, too petty and contemptible, Sister Rose, to be worth notice or thought, or certainly the troubling of your dear, tender heart. To you it is terrible; it would crush you, perhaps; you could not face the man with whom scandal linked you so shamefully; and of me, you perhaps think—”

“I think, my dear,” said Miss Neville firmly, “that Lady Glen-Luna is a very wicked woman, and had no right, for her own evil ends, to put a young and beautiful

woman in such a position. That is what I think, child."

The blood flushed to Gabrielle's brow, then rushed back on her wild, beating heart, with almost suffocating force! Did Rose guess how cruelly successful that end had been?

She stopped her restless walk, then, before Miss Neville—pressing her hands on her breast.

"Yes, I know that, Sister Rose, few women would take the place I hold, or be indifferent to all they say and gossip; but I do not care; I have borne too much of the heavy sea to care for the spray and froth. Great Heaven!" she said, with such a sudden, passionate force in every tone, every line, as startled Sister Rose, "I have lived such a life with my husband as no man of common honour would subject a mistress to if she were faithful to him. You are good, Rose, and had a happy home, and those who loved you; you would never

have done as I have done; never been tempted as I have been! You deem me reckless, very Bohemian, perhaps callous, even shameless, because I will not give in one jot to this scandal about myself and Douglas Glen-Luna; but I am neither, though it is only by God's mercy that I am not lost to all womanhood. I *am* reckless, I know that, and what wonder? I never had one better or happy influence. I never had a home from the hour I was sent an orphan of six years old from my mother's land of Italy."

"My poor child! Oh, my poor heart!" said Rose; her eyes were full, her loving hands outstretched, but the fierce tide had for once swept over the dykes and swept on! Gabrielle shrank back.

"You are so good and pure yourself that I dare to let you see the dark phases of a life of which you never even dreamed; of such a wild, passionate, undisciplined being as I am and was—though you shrank in

incredulous horror from the glimpse you caught in that outline report you read. Look you, Rose, I had no one even to warn me. I was sent to a distant relative who had the school, and beyond being taught I was utterly neglected, or rather only remembered to be treated with cruelty, harshness, attempted repressions ; the school was a horrible prison-house to such a wild, high untamed spirit as mine ; it could not break me, as it would some, or kill me, but it made me a mad, desperate, reckless thing, and when the first temptation came, under the guise of love, and care, and escape, I met it."

She walked to the end of the room once more, back, to and fro several times, and stopped again, locking and unlocking the slender hands with a passionate restlessness that spoke a volume of agony in itself.

"Your exquisite sympathy unlocks a floodgate which shows you a mass of wild seething waters that almost frighten you—

a world of shame and misery so foreign to anything you have seen or heard of that it may well appal you."

"A world that would have killed me," said Rose, under her breath.

"I know that; it would have crushed most—killed some. I don't know how I bore it so long, only that I grew reckless and desperate on one side, and on the other, I tell you, Rose, I *was afraid of myself*. I tried so hard through all to do my duty—to be loyal to my vows, however terribly he broke his! I had no help, no safeguard, so young as I was. I was scarcely sixteen when Leicester Albany crossed my path, met me as by chance constantly in my stolen evening walks; then they found it out somehow—charged me with meeting handsome, wild, Leicester Albany, designedly; dared to lock me in my room! That maddened me; it was the last thread snapped. I escaped out of the window into the garden—over the wall—out into the

bitter winter night—and there he was. Well, my fate was sealed that miserable night; he told me how he loved me—and he did, as such men's 'love' goes, as long as it lasted—he arranged our flight, and three mornings later, quite early, in the cold and darkness, that was surely a type of my future, I, child, of just sixteen, fled with the *roué*. We drove straight to London—to the church, and by half-past eight, before even I could be missed, I was Albany's wife."

Rose drew a breath of intense relief.

"Thank God!" escaped her. "I had somehow almost feared that you were going to tell me that he had deceived you after all with a false marriage."

"No," said Gabrielle, so sternly, with such a gleam in her dark eyes as made gentle Rose shiver. "He knew me too well to dare even to try that, for I should have killed him in the hour I knew it. Then he took me abroad."

“ But you did not love him, Gabrielle ? ”

“ Love ! No, never ! He was handsome, winning. He was the only one who had been kind to me or cared for me for years—gave me freedom—the world. I liked him, clung to him as the drowning clings to the hand that saves ; I was even fond of him, as we are to one who sets wide prison doors ; and if he had been different to what he was—what he showed himself so soon to be—God knows I would have done all my duty, and learned to love him. I suppose I ought to then ”—with bitter scorn—“ if hearts can be won by all that gold and a man’s passion can give—and his lasted in full sway quite two years. I was carressed, petted, envied. Ye Gods ! Envied by the women, adored by the men ; queen wherever he took me,—flung into his world’s vortex from the hour almost that made me his wife.”

She stopped again for a minute, then went on.

“When you read the outline of the story, Sister Rose, you could not believe, cannot now realise, a man making his own wife the bait and attraction to his gaming *salons*—for his were nothing less—and the more his fortune went, the more Bohemian and adventurer he became. Then passion sated—died out,—save for a few flashes at times; he was tired of his handsome plaything, and tossed it about more carelessly than ever—or rather as time went on—more deliberately, for he wanted to be rid of it to any one who would take it.”

“Gabrielle! How horrible! Dear child! Was the man a devil?” Rose broke out.

“I thought so then, I think so still!” the other answered, resuming her walk. “The child was born when I had been nearly four years married, but it was delicate, and it only lived a few months. I told him I was glad, because God had spared me such an awful duty.”

“Oh, Gabrielle!”

“Yes, I was,” she said, with a kind of fierce agony in her large, dry eyes. “It was one night in Monaco, it died in my arms, on my breast; and he—my husband, its father, came in, straight up from the *salon de jeu* below, with a pack of cards in his hand. Then I said it, and I meant it, because I was its heartbroken mother, and loved it! O God! how I loved it! for it was all I had, but I gave it gladly back to Paradise.

“It was better so for its own sake,” said Rose softly; “and for yours, too, darling, for it spared you an awful sin.”

Gabrielle’s breast heaved, and she stopped abruptly again before Miss Neville.

“Would it have been such a sin, Rose, to save it from growing up to be like its father? Well, well, perhaps you are right. I have sin enough on my head, for in the misery of my life of wrongs I was maddened, and utterly reckless sometimes, and tempted—oh! how cruelly tempted—to take some

desperate step. Once — O Rose — pure, good Rose, still pity me if you shrink from the sin, I was so nearly, so terribly tempted to fly from him ! not because I loved the man, though I liked him, for he was better than all the rest, and really loved me—ay, if I had been free he would have offered only marriage. This was in the States, and was in truth the beginning of this end. Leicester was jealous of him, because he knew I liked him. He had given me a beautiful red setter, which was always with me, but could not bear my husband or his friend — the dastard I shot. Well, one night Leicester came in and saw me caressing my favourite, and swore that he would kill it. I dared him to touch the dog, and Rose ! Rose ! the next minute he drew a pistol, and shot the animal at my feet.”

The woman was choking ; she was going through the whole scene again ; and Rose covered her eyes.

“ It was well for him,” said Gabrielle

after that pause, "that he got out of my way the moment the dastard deed was done, for I—let it pass! it is one of my blackest counts against him. It was that evening, an hour later, the other—the dog's master—came in and found out about the dog. I was mad, I think, Rose, and when, for the first time, he forgot all but my wrongs and misery, I almost—almost fled with him; blame me, despise me if you will, Rose, I deserve it, but before Heaven I can swear that it was not because *then*, even in my heart, I was false to my vow of fidelity, but simply because I was mad with agony and my wrongs, and knew not what I did; and then, even in the minute I set foot to cross the threshold, I saw the horror of what I was doing—and turned back."

"My darling child! my brave, noble heart! strong then in temptation after all, by God's help."

"Yes, that is it, dear Rose. I am not strong, not now," the words fell brokenly

“You know what the end was, till I fled away alone because I was no more safe. Rose, do you wonder now why I care so little for these village scandals? I have been stabbed so deeply that mere flesh wounds cannot scathe me. Why should I care? The only beings I value will not believe it of me—you, and your brother, and—and Douglas Glen-Luna.” She could not control the falter, the blood that tinged her dark cheek, and Rose looked up to meet her eyes, and suddenly drew Gabrielle to her.

“My poor child! Oh, my poor child! I knew it must be!”

Sweet Rose! Just that one touch of womanly love and sympathy broke down the woman's natural barrier. Gabrielle was kneeling at her feet, her face buried in her lap.

“Rose! O Rose! how can I help it! how can I help it, when he is so helpless, and his very life is in my hands!”

Such a wild, passionate burst of grief as, perhaps, Rose had never yet witnessed, and would scarcely realise yet. She could only clasp the quivering form closer, soothing by loving touch alone, at first, till presently the smothered sobs grew less, crushed partly by the strong habit of control and self-suppression ; no need for words, Rose felt—knew—that with the whole force of her impassioned nature, the whole depth and strength of her woman's heart, Gabrielle Albany loved Douglas Glen-Luna once and for ever ; that for him she could endure more than ever she had yet borne—all, all but dishonour itself ; a love in itself so pure and loyal that it could not lower her—wife though she was—from her own high moral stand-point, even in her own eyes, much less in his, if he should read her secret. How true her brother's words had been, came now upon Rose with tenfold force.

“ It is all darkness, and misery, and shame,” the rich, pathetic voice came after

that long silence, “for, though every moral obligation is broken—every tie snapped, long ago—ay, more than you dream of even now, Rose—still I am wedded wife to Leicester Albany, and yet—yet—God knows I have struggled so hard all these awful years of torture and temptation to be loyal at least to my own honour—my marriage vow. I have reddened this right hand in blood to save it; I have fought now such a fierce battle against this last subtle temptation that mastered my very heart of woman before even I knew it—and I am vanquished at last, Rose. It is too late—too late—God help me! I love Douglas Glen-Luna—I—another man’s wife!”

Sister Rose’s white hands were laid tenderly on that bowed, stricken head; Sister Rose’s dear, loving lips, breathed the simple, grand prayer of old, as she bent down,—

“Lord, lay not this sin to her charge.”

And then there was a long, intense silence.

But, as the incense ascends from God's Altar, so shall the prayer of the righteous ascend to the Great White Throne, and be heard; for we know that "the smoking flax will He not quench, and the bruised reed will He not break."

Then, at last, Gabrielle lifted her face, so deathly white, but oh, how beautiful! and kissed Rose Neville as one might kiss some holy saint of old; then rose up.

"Sister, indeed, saint below; if I had but known you in my childhood, I had never stood here now—what I am, wronged, broken-hearted, fallen."

"Hush, hush, Gabrielle! My dear, I will not hear you. It is not true—no, it is not, or I would not tell you so; you are not fallen, even in thought or heart; for you have fought, not yielded, to the sin."

"Have I not?" said the other, sadly; "I have fought, truly, and been vanquished. I *have* yielded; I am beaten back; I have ceased to fight."

“ You have not, child, not as long as you feel such agony and shame, not so long as the very love itself is pure and loyal in itself.”

“ Rose, my St Rose, you have lightened my burden of guilt for me.”

“ Not I, my child,” said Rose gently—and pointed upwards.

.





CHAPTER VI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

YET so wonderful was this woman's control over self, so great her power of, as it were, suppressing self, that when, a quarter-of-an-hour later, they passed into the *salon*, even Douglas's keen glance could only detect that the face he loved so well looked weary; and Rose herself could scarcely realise that this was the same woman who had so recently knelt at her feet in such passionate agony.

"How wicked of Gabrielle to keep you all to herself so long, dear Sister Rose!"

said Glen-Luna, as she came to his side, "when you know you are my property."

"Indeed, sir," said a bright voice at the door, "I thought my sister was my property," and Chandos Neville walked in smiling.

"How jolly to see you so unexpectedly!" exclaimed Douglas; "what good luck brought you, most notable son of Æsculapius?"

"He came to see me," said Mrs Albany; "didn't you, Dr Neville?"

"You rather look as if you wanted some looking after," said he, lightly, but with a keen glance. "However, at the risk of being rude, I must tell the truth—if you, fair Jesuit, ever admit that necessity—I got home just now, learned that Rose was up here, and had the—"

"Cheek," put in Douglas, gravely.

"Precisely; the cheek to know that I might come up too."

"Good boy," said Gabrielle, laughingly,

"isn't he, *mon ami* ? and I hope you have no tiresome patients to take you away, for neither of you are going yet."

"Not," added Douglas, "till after dinner and a long evening. I'm not going down; they must get along without me; you will stop?"

"If Mrs Albany will excuse my morning dress."

"Mrs Albany will excuse anything if you will only stay; and you are the very person I was wishing to see; I want to speak to you a few words, so, if we may be excused a few minutes, just come with me."

"They're going to hatch some dark plot!" said Douglas, tragically pointing, as the physician rose and followed Gabrielle to her own sitting-room. She shut the door carefully and turned to him.

"You guess, of course," she said, "that it is about our charge I wish to speak?"

"Yes, Mrs Albany."

"I want you to tell me, if you can, how

far he has actually gained ; I can see myself a marvellous change."

"There is a marvellous change," said Neville, "the gain in him has exceeded my utmost hopes."

For a moment her breast heaved, her lips quivered with the joy that flashed through her—the woman who loved him.

"Can you yet," she said, "fix in any degree a time when he will walk at all?"

"I should hardly like to say so much, dear Mrs Albany ; I think that he will go on up to a certain point apparently slowly, and then take, as it were, a sudden step. When once he is able to walk a little—even across a room—he will gain rapidly. I hope to begin that trial in a month or six weeks ; I hope to see him like you or me in six or seven months."

Her hands were locked ; the blood flushed to her cheek.

"Thank God ! then you have no fear of failure now, Dr Neville ?"

“I should, perhaps, be over-confident to say absolutely no fear, but still, broadly speaking, I have none. I have steadily dislodged the evil, and have never once gone back a step—thanks to your aid too, and watch against the enemy.”

“It is of that I wanted to speak. At present she thinks that he is losing, not gaining, but when the time comes for him to walk, she will see at once that she has been deceived.”

“Well, let her—what then?”

“I don’t think you quite fathom her as I do yet, Dr Neville,” said Gabrielle, slowly, and laying her hand on his arm, “I have never spoken out in plain words yet, but if she sees her intended victim is slipping away, she will try some quicker, more desperate measure, as she did once before. You remember the lift?”

“Yes,” he shuddered; “but she can hardly do anything, watched as he is by you and Harford.”

An anxious look came into her eyes, almost a haggard look.

"It is a terrible thing, Dr Neville, to live with such an awful thing as murder in the very air we breathe—death to one so precious."

He stood looking at her for a minute.

"It is awful," he said slowly, "that woman is a devil."

"Harford's very words," said Gabrielle; "look you, Dr Neville, you said long ago that when he reached a certain point we must get him abroad to one of the German spas."

"Well, so I say still; but I hardly thought of attempting to move him so far till he could walk a little."

Her face changed.

"Don't you think he could be moved before that—in a few weeks?"—she said, with something of almost passionate eagerness in her manner and large eyes—"got out of this horrible atmosphere of danger?"

“Good Heaven! Mrs Albany, do you suspect, know of, anything worse?” said Chandos, starting.

“I know this,” she answered, sternly, “that she has come across a man in whom I think it will be strange if she does not find an accomplice. I will not point him out until I am more sure, but I think if it were possible to remove Douglas it would be well.”

“If I think it can be done in a few weeks, Mrs Albany, how do you propose its being managed? for your attendance is necessary as much as mine.”

“My idea—if you both could, and will—would be for you and Sister Rose and myself to go, and, possibly, Sir Arthur; that would be best for the sake of all; but if he cannot, why surely your sister is enough to play propriety; for myself I care nothing.”

“A very good plan, Mrs Albany, but your name must be our care, if it is so far not yours, as weighed against Douglas’s

welfare. He would not hear of any scheme that could harm you. Well, I will think over it, and we will talk about it again. It all depends on how he gets on. We must run no risk."

"God forbid!—sooner tell Sir Arthur all," Gabrielle said under her breath; "thank you, Dr Neville, that is all I could ask."

And then they returned to the other room.





CHAPTER VII.

CHANDOS NEVILLE'S FAVOURITE FLOWER.

“**W**HERE are you going, Hyacinth?” said Lady Constance one morning, meeting her daughter in the hall, with her broad-brimmed hat on, “I thought you were going driving with the rest of us.”

Mamma Lee's tone was uneasy. She was much like a hen with a duckling.

“I am not going with them, mammy mine. My dear, beautiful Mrs Albany told me I might come with her and Mr Glen-Luna; and of course her invitation is his.”

Lady Constance's brow cleared; and the saucy girl added,—

“He and I are such capital friends, he is such a dear fellow. Ta-ta, they’re waiting for me, I dare say, by the west wing.”

And away she danced.

Mrs Albany was slowly pushing the elegant chair across the lawn when Hyacinth caught sight of them, and her tongue began at once.

“It’s so awfully good of you to let me come with you both. Where are you going?”

“I think down to our favourite nook near the river,” answered Gabrielle; “what say you, *mon ami*?”

“My dear, yours and Miss Lee’s pleasure is mine,” was the instant reply; “by the way, Gabrielle, did not Harford say he thought he would have time to ride over to see his sister, Mrs Bevan, while we were out here?”

“Yes; the poor thing does not get on very fast; low fever is a tiresome, lingering thing.”

“Who is attending her?” asked Hyacinth.

“Oh, Dr Neville, of course,” said Douglas—in fact, he had sent him himself, as Hyacinth guessed. She walked on in silence, thinking, thinking—of him, and wishing—little goose—that she had not got—six thousand a-year. Then she chattered gaily again; and when they stopped at the same little nook in which Chandos had once found them she declared she could not sit still just yet.

“I’ll go and try to find a lot of wild flowers and ferns; do you admire ferns, Mr Glen-Luna?”

“I admire anything in your fair hands, Miss Lee.”

“What a humbug you are; isn’t he, Gabrielle?”

“My dear, we can’t get along in the world without humbug,” said Mrs Albany, amused.

“Oh fie! you are as bad as he is. I know you both hold shocking sentiments,” laughed Hyacinth. “I should like to put you in the fabled chair of truth.”

"The most detestable, horrible idea ever devised for torture," said Douglas, with wicked viciousness; "I could not wish worse to my bitterest enemy."

"Hear, hear!" added Mrs Albany, "who could stand such a test?"

"Well, no one, I suppose. Now I'm off. Are you coming, Angus, or have your master and mistress greater attractions than a race?"

Angus got up, wagged his tail, put his handsome head on one side as if he were weighing the matter, looked up at his master, and whined softly.

"Poor Angus, your loving, canine heart is torn; well, go and take care of her, boy; she is not going far off."

And Angus bounded off after Hyacinth Lee.

She knew where to look for ferns, and made for the wood about half-a-mile off, where she soon filled her hands with the delicate, feathery-looking leaves.

"There, Angus," she said at length, "we'll rest—or I shall—on this huge tree-

bough for a few minutes before we return to your master," suiting the action to the word, and perfectly unaware what an exquisite picture she made sitting there, with the rich background of green foliage and red-brown tints on the trees—"what's the matter, Angus?"

The collie had pricked up his ears at the sound he caught—a light footstep amongst the fallen leaves; and he jumped up to meet the intruder, whoever he was.

"Why you, Angus; not alone then, surely, old fellow?"

A voice that made the blood rush over the girl's cheek and brow, and her heart beat wildly with such a tumult of feelings that she could not even move. The next moment the tall form of Chandos Neville came out.

"Miss Lee! you alone, out here!"

Do what she would, the hand he clasped for one moment would tremble, and the

colour come and go in her fair, soft face, as he sat down at her side.

"I came out with Mr Glen-Luna and Mrs Albany," she said; "were you going up to see them, Dr Neville?"

"I was, but I thought I would go round by the dell to see if they were there."

"They are there; I came to look for ferns, and see what a lot I have got; aren't they lovely, Dr Neville?"

"Very; but still, the loveliest fern does not compare to a flower."

"That is true, especially," she added, looking up for a moment with a smile, "with what I suppose is your favourite flower, since you have such a rare specimen at your house."

"Have I, Miss Lee? what is that?"

"You know quite well," said she, with a bad attempt at her usual pretty, saucy ease of manner,—“a rose, of course.”

How sweet was the smile that lighted up his hazel eyes; but he answered quietly, and

not seeming to notice a restless movement of hers to go.

"A most precious rose, indeed—but still, your guess is not quite right, I have a still greater favourite in the floral world."

"Have you?" The blue eyes opened wide in real wonder. "You told Mrs Albany that roses were your favourites."

"Did I? some weeks ago, then. Guess if you can—only"—looking down with an odd smile, "I warn you it is a very rare flower."

"Something tropic, then—hothouse?"

"No, a simple flower, after all—try again."

"I'm a bad hand at guessing anything, Dr Nelville; you'll have to tell me, I suspect," said Hyacinth, with another movement.

"May I tell you?"

She tried to answer carelessly.

"Yes, if you like; what is it, then?"

"Only—a—hyacinth."

A moment's pause, one hurried, fleeting

look, and Hyacinth was clasped passionately to her lover's breast.

"My Hyacinth! my darling! can such happiness be mine?"

Happy, trembling little flower; how she clung to him, almost weeping; how all within and without was one blaze of glorious sunshine now.

He spoke presently, drawing her closer still.

"I have been such a coward, darling, I have been so afraid, so dreading that you would think me base and mercenary. I had so little in comparison to lay at your feet, save the heart you won so soon."

"That you made yourself and me miserable, you bad, stupid fellow!" whispered the dear, sweet voice. "How could you? you deserve to be punished. I wish the horrid gold was all at the bottom of the sea. Oh, Chandos! Chandos! would you really have gone away and left your favourite flower for that?"

"No, no! Hyacinth, dearest heart, forgive me that I was coward so long; you can understand, feel how I felt, darling."

"Yes—quite."

"And then, Hyacinth, I was puzzled. I almost feared once—quite at first—that you liked Clifford Brandon."

"I detest him!" interrupted Hyacinth from her resting-place. "I flirted with him to tease Jessie."

"Then I thought that there had been something between you and Douglas."

"You very ingenious self-tormentor; he and I have had many a laugh in the old time about poor mamma's hopes, and the stepmother's fear of me, so we squared it between us, and have been first-rate friends. Try more confessions, Dr Neville," lifting her bright face with such a saucy look, that Chandos, as any lover would, bent down and kissed it.

"Is not that enough? It only remains for me to ask your mother—"

Hyacinth broke into a merry, rippling laugh.

“Poor mammy mine! what *will* she say to a professional man, when she destined poor me for a coronet at least? She will make a terrible fuss, and refuse ever to see me again if I don't give in, and hold out a month or two, perhaps. Poor, dear old pet! her bark is much worse than her bite.”

Neville could not help laughing, though, man-like, in his secret heart he dreaded facing Mamma Lee's fire more than a sixty-pound gun. Men always do dread a feminine tongue, and no wonder either; for a woman in her temper can sting a man to the very quick, and he, as a gentleman, has no retort.

Miss Hyacinth, certainly, never for one moment contemplated the least giving in to maternal ambition—if that grand word can be used to such petty, small aspirings as a fine match for one's daughter.

How the time passed neither of them could have reckoned ; but Mrs Albany had just remarked to Douglas that she wondered where Hyacinth was, when lo ! Angus bounded joyously up, and the physician and his companion came up.

It needed but a glance between them, from one to the other, and then Hyacinth's crimson, happy face was hidden on Gabrielle's shoulder, and the close clasp of the two men told more than language. And in the noble heart of the younger man there was not one pang, one bitter thought that his own heart's story was so dark, so helpless, so weighted with misery.

Douglas was the first to speak, and his first words were said with his most wicked look.

“Poor Lady Constance.”

“She cannot hold out long,” said Mrs Albany, passing her beautiful hand caressingly over the fair head, still nestling against her, as Hyacinth knelt beside her.

84 *Chandos Neville's Favourite Flower.*

'A loving woman finds heaven or hell
The day she is made a bride.'

God make your's all paradise."

Ay, in all the opposite to her own
miserable marriage—a hell, indeed, such as
few tread.





CHAPTER VIII.

GABRIELLE MAKES A BOLD MOVE.

THE Saltouns' departure was now fixed for the beginning of next week, Percy Rosslyn's for a day or two later, and Lady Glen-Luna deemed it time to speak to Sir Arthur about the offer made to her daughter by Clifford Brandon. From her husband this woman anticipated nothing but ready and delighted consent, if only he was assured that "his little witch's" affections were involved, and Brandon sufficiently well-off to be a suitable *parti* for his daughter. So far, she had reckoned rightly enough, but her ladyship was somewhat taken aback, and both vexed

and vaguely uneasy when Sir Arthur ended his general assent and an eulogium of Clifford Brandon by saying that before seeing him to give formal assent to an engagement, he would just step up and see what his son thought of it. Adeline dared not oppose such a reasonable wish, nor did it suit her cue to show the least distrust of Douglas, the more so because—especially since the accident—the old man had been more wrapped up in his son, and a great part of her own influence had, from the first, depended on her feigned affection for this only son.

“Very well, dear,” she said sweetly, “only remember that if you refuse, it will break the poor child’s heart.”

That was one afternoon, and Sir Arthur, very rightly thinking that no time was like the present, went off at once to the west wing to see if his son was in—most likely so, as the day was dull and cloudy—and, as he stepped up the wide, shallow-stepped

stone staircase to his son's apartments, he heard the rich, full tones of the Broadwood —under a skilled hand —and, after all, what pianos surpass those matchless grands with which we are so familiar?

At his tap Henselt's exquisite *étude* stopped, and Mrs Albany's voice said,—

“Come in.”

Douglas was lying on the sofa, his beautiful head resting on his hand, listening in dreamy happiness to the music, and perhaps weaving round the pianiste another dream as visionary as dangerous and hopeless.

“Dear father! you here!” he said, with a quick flush of pleasure, half starting up.

“Don't you move, my boy; can you spare me a few minutes? Don't you go, Mrs Albany, but just you take your own low chair there.”

She smiled, drew forward a chair for the baronet near his son, and obeyed his order with a heart that throbbed heavily—a

suspicion of his errand had instantly flashed across the mind of Albany's wife.

"There, that's right, my dear; you're in your right place. Why should you go either? for I dare swear Douglas has no secrets from you now, and I am sure I have not. I don't count you a stranger, you know, for you quite belong to Douglas now."

"You are very kind, Sir Arthur."

She leaned back a little, stifling a sigh, and Sir Arthur turned to his son.

"I wanted just to speak to you, Douglas, about what I suppose will be no news exactly to either of you two, for you must have seen it all these weeks."

"What is that, father?"

"Why, that little puss of a sister of yours," said the baronet, evidently much delighted, "like all the rest—eh, Mrs Albany?—gone and fallen in love. Adeline has just been speaking to me about it. Clifford Brandon has asked her hand, but

I would not speak to him till I had seen you—as my only son should, I think, have some voice in his sister's marriage."

"Thank you, father. I had expected it would end in an offer from him," said Douglas quietly, but the quick contraction of the brow and compression of the lips told its tale to the woman at his side, though his father read only the quiet tone, and read that wrongly.

"Ah, then, you have no objection. I like him very much, and I see no reason why I should not accept him ; he's a gentleman of family—a Brandon of ——shire ; he is well off, and offers to make any settlement I like."

Gabrielle set her teeth like a vice. Heaven! must she stand by and not denounce this villany—must she still suffer and bear, and feel herself weighed down with agony? Yès, still, still, for his sake by whom she sat, over whom she watched, for whose sake her husband—the world—might brand her ;

yes, woman's love could face even that. But Douglas's lips curled, and he lifted himself quickly.

"As to all that, father, you and Adeline were, I presume, well assured, before you asked Brandon here at all. I have no actual objection to make, because I have no right to do so without very good tangible grounds; but, if you ask me if I like the man, or any such marriage, I can't deceive you, father. I do not like him, though I suppose no one here, except Gabrielle, guessed or knew that; he is a guest under your roof, *voilà tout*."

"But, my dear boy!" exclaimed Sir Arthur, aghast, "what have you to say against him, except, perhaps, that one would have wished a younger suitor?"

"Dear father, forgive me! It grieves me to pain you since your and Adeline's mind are evidently made up; but, for myself, be his antecedents and fortune what they may, I do not like or trust the man

himself; it may be unreasonable, or perhaps mistaken, but there it is, and I can't alter my feelings, or think the less that he is—certainly has been—a *roué*, however it may wound you all to say it. He must not expect me to be cordial—only courteous—as the lover and husband of Jessie.”

Sir Arthur sat gazing in his son's handsome face for a minute, then from him to Mrs Albany, and said, abruptly,—

“And what do you think of Clifford Brandon, Mrs Albany?”

She started—flushed—grew deadly pale again; and answered, with a quickness that was almost hurried.

“Pardon me, Sir Arthur, but—in my position, I have no right to speak—my opinion is nothing; I am only your son's paid attendant.”

“*Nein, nein, Gabrielle!*” said Douglas, under his breath, “*um meinetwillen!*”

Her hand trembled, the tears came into her eyes—“for his sake!”—what stronger

plea could he have used to arrest the words that so pained him ?

“*Ach !*—forgive me,” she whispered in the same language, and turned to Sir Arthur.

“I should not have answered you so, dear Sir Arthur, since you honour me by asking my opinion at all ; it goes entirely, then, with your son’s, and did from the first ; a woman’s reason you will say.”

“Ha, ha ; I think I must say the same of Douglas, too, then,” said Sir Arthur, laughing, though rather vexed at finding his son disagree with him, “it’s lucky for Brandon that Jessie is of such an opposite mind.”

She looked down, biting her lip. Douglas asked, as his father rose,—

“You mean to accept him, then, father ?”

“Well, my dear boy, you see, I can hardly reasonably refuse him.”

“He knows, of course,” said Douglas, carelessly, “that at my death Jessie is heiress of Glen-Luna.”

"Douglas! don't speak of your death!" exclaimed his father, "I won't hear it boy! Do you let him talk like that, Mrs Albany?"

"Dear father!" the young man stretched out his hand and clasped his father's, "forgive me! I did not mean that I am worse, or likely to die, but only literally what I said; and Brandon may not be as disinterested as you think."

"I think you misjudge him, indeed, dear boy; he could hardly, besides, be so stupid as to reckon on such a remote contingency as—"

"Remote, father! with only my one life between—"

"Only *one*," repeated Sir Arthur, with the sharpness that springs from sharp pain, "I hope to live to call a wife of yours daughter, and hold a son of yours in my old arms."

"Hush, oh hush! Oh, father, don't hope that! How can it ever be?"

A bitter, passionate cry, wrung forth by

the sharp agony of that double stab, only one of which the father read—both of which the woman who loved him felt, knew too well—yet woman-like his moment of weakness was her strength, fiercely as the dagger quivered in her own heart; but she spoke no word to him, only laid her soft hand on his, as he buried his face in the cushions, letting it rest there; her words were to his father,—

“You remember the Martyr King Charles’ favourite motto, ‘*Dum spiro, spero.*’ We have been thinking of the possibility of getting him abroad to one of the German spas; ah, *mon ami*, don’t start so, nor you, dear Sir Arthur, look so alarmed; it is not because he is worse, or we could not dream of moving him.”

“Child, then! tell me the truth; he is better! Douglas!”

“He cannot answer you as I can, Sir Arthur,” said Gabrielle firmly; and Douglas neither moved nor spoke. “Dr Neville and

I think his general strength better ; these apartments, too, want doing-up differently ; he is weary of the sameness ; and, therefore, if in a few weeks we shall find it possible, we shall propose arranging, as I said, a journey to Germany, Dr and Miss Neville accompanying us."

"My dear girl!"—the old baronet's voice was quite husky—"anything you can wish or devise for my dear boy's welfare shall be done ; what you wish done must be right ; you are so clever, so noble, so devoted—"

"Hush, don't, don't !" she said hurriedly, "I have only tried to do my duty."

"*Tried!* Well, well, if it pain you, I will say no more ; but Douglas knows better than I do how much we owe to you."

"God knows you are right, father."

With these words Douglas lifted his face once more ; he had not dared till now to trust himself, so deep was the wild heart's agony, so fierce its self warfare.

There was a moment's silence, and Sir Arthur rose up to go. Then Gabrielle said quietly,—

“Do not repeat to anyone, Sir Arthur, one word about what I have said; I had rather not, until we have settled it more certainly. Will you remember?”

“Your wish is law, my dear; isn't it, Douglas?”

“It is my law,” he answered, with a grave smile; and his father, saying that he must see Clifford Brandon, took leave.

Douglas lay quite silent until the retreating steps had died away, and then he touched Mrs Albany.

“Gabrielle, is this scheme you spoke of only a part of your line of action, or a reality?”

“Both,” she said, steadily meeting those glowing, deep, dark eyes.

“You know that I know all?”

All! Although she knew exactly what his “all” comprehended, the mere thought,

the very form of words, made her shiver from head to foot ; and yet what would not that miserable woman have given to kneel down at his feet and tell him really—all—all ; but for his sake she must bear it still alone—quite alone. She answered only,—

“Yes, I know that. You would like to go, I know you would, as a prisoner would leap at escape.”

“You are right, Gabrielle, but for one thing, which compels me for once to interfere with your plans.”

“What do you mean, *mon ami* ?”

“Forgive me, dear Gabrielle, if I must wound you—but your honour, your name is as precious to me as my own—a thousand times more so than my worthless life, or even recovery.”

“Hush, for pity’s sake !” She put her hand hurriedly on his lips, “you cannot—do not—know all the—the danger that is in the very air here. *My* honour ! my name ! Good heaven ! it is only under

your roof that it has been cared for, protected, and neither will be harmed under that protection whether here or in Germany; I am married, your attendant, secretary, we travel with your physician and his sister—a middle-aged woman—if possible, too, we intend to get your father to go with us and remain a month—”

“Ah, if that is done, Gabrielle—”

“Stay, Mr Douglas; it cannot, shall not, depend on that,” she interrupted, more in her usual manner; “you have been so good and obedient all through, I cannot hear of any disobedience and rebellion now, when more than ever meek obedience is necessary. Will you promise, and still be my own good boy, or must I reserve the battle until Dr Neville comes?”

He kissed her hand, and laughed a little, shaking his head.

“I will let it rest, dearest of autocrats, till the question is actually on the *tapis*. Will that do?”

“It must, I suppose; but remember *I* shall not yield.”

“Go and play me that Henselt *étude* which was interrupted,” said Douglas, smiling, adding in a pretended aside, “*il faut reculer pour mieux sauter.*”





CHAPTER IX.

TARQUIN'S LESSON STILL STANDS.

SIR ARTHUR GLEN-LUNA'S interview with his son and Gabrielle Albany left behind a vague, uncomfortable kind of feeling about his daughter's suitor, a feeling too vague and shadowy for him at any rate, to analyse in the remotest degree, but which resolved itself so far into the somewhat vexed words, "I wish Douglas had not said what he did; I had rather fifty times that he had liked the marriage and the man, and Mrs Albany. Ah, how I wish that *she* were a widow, and Douglas would—"

But there the dressing-bell for dinner rang, and the baronet's train of thought was interrupted.

Still he and his wife liked Clifford Brandon, and Jessie was in love with him; and they had allowed the matter to go too far to draw back with honour, just for no other reason than Douglas's dislike to the man; for admittedly no more tangible reason could be given. Douglas, of course, knew well enough that, regarding her daughter, Adeline's influence would probably outweigh his objection, and so he had tacitly declined a contest in which he was almost certain of defeat. That Jessie's probable heirship was the man's real motive, he felt as sure as the woman at his side, who knew it too well. However deeper and further his suspicions went, he never even hinted them even to Gabrielle; she might guess, read them; but he would not add one iota to the pain and deadly anxiety of hers and Harford's watch; of hers

more than all—his darling, his “first—last love.”

So Mr Clifford Brandon was accepted, and an engagement with Jessie Glen-Luna understood; so far, then, Leicester Albany had gained one—if not the most important—step in his desperate scheme—he had secured the prize, and in penetrating Adeline’s secret, gained, as she had, the accomplice he needed as much as she did. No actual word—certainly no word that could shock the ear of either—had passed their lips, and yet each perfectly understood the other. The obstacle to the fortune, which both coveted, must be swept away; Jessie’s hand, so endowed, was the price and reward.

“Like draws like,” it is said, and that applies to evil every whit as much as to good: two bad natures will gravitate towards each other as unerringly as two high-toned people.

When that evening, out in the gardens, Albany asked her if she and “his darling

Jessie" would fix on an early period to make him the happiest of men, the little dainty lady at his side sighed, glanced off towards the west wing, and said sadly,—

"Indeed, Clifford, I hardly know what to say about it until our hopes and fears about our dear Douglas are more certain, for good or—or bad. Sometimes, of late, I have almost hoped that he was really getting stronger under Mrs Albany's care, and then she is forced to crush one by reporting him not so well. If in a few weeks all these miserable doubts and fears are decided"—she dropped the words slowly as she bent over a rose-bush—"we can make some arrangement, you know. There! provoking! Do, Clifford, gather me that topmost rose," she added, interrupting herself; "it is faded, and disfigures the tree."

Leicester Albany smiled as he obeyed—such a smile—and, bending low as he gave it to her, said,—

"Dear Lady Glen-Luna, I am always at

your service, even to such a trifle as removing a poor faded flower."

"Thank you." Shè looked in his face and laughed—her hard, mirthless laugh—then threw the rose on the grass, and set her foot upon it, with a flash in the cold, grey-blue eyes that made them glitter like steel.

Tarquin, when he cut off the heads off the tallest poppies, left a lesson, for good or for bad, which stands for all time.

And while one suitor was accepted, another, under the same roof, was rejected, which was only what Neville had expected, and it in nowise disturbed his equanimity. His mind once made up to a certain end, once convinced that that end was right and honourable, and he was firm as a rock.

Lady Constance simply declined "his proposal for her daughter's hand; she had other views for her, and they must part;" which, delivered to a man of thirty-five, and a woman of four-and-twenty, struck

Chandos as so amusing that he almost smiled as he very courteously, but steadily, replied that that was impossible. He held himself bound, though Hyacinth he considered free, but that they would wait a few months in the hope of her (Lady Constance) changing her mind on the subject. He was, he said—and this was a part of an agreed-upon plan in Gabrielle's game of chess—going to Germany with a patient shortly, he believed, and might, perhaps, be absent six or eight months; but whenever he returned, he hoped that she would rescind her present refusal. At present, when they met in the house by chance, it would be as friends, so far as others were concerned. He declined to give any promise not to write to Hyacinth, or see her; on the contrary, he said he should do both occasionally.

With that he withdrew, leaving Lady Constance feeling very dumfounded, and with a very uncomfortable sense that she

would be beaten. She tried speaking to her daughter, but in vain. Miss Hyacinth opened her blue eyes, laughed, and clapped her hands, declaring that "Chandos was the dearest fellow in the world, and had behaved exactly as she knew he would. I told you, mamma, that I should marry some professional man, and choose for myself; and you won't say no in the end, sweetest mammy mine, I know."

"My dear," said mamma, folding her hands, "I cannot sanction a suitor whose difference of fortune—"

"Now, mamma, not a word, please, dear, about the detestable money, or I vow I'll make it all over to charities, or Mrs Albany, or—"

"Don't be absurd, Hyacinth, when Lee's Folly is entailed. And I don't think"—severely—"that Mrs Leicester Albany is, after all, the best companion for you; she is so very independent, and has such a will of her own."

"She's a jewel—a darling!" said Hyacinth; "and you sha'n't abuse her, dear, any more than Chandos."

"Chandos, indeed!" said her ladyship indignantly. "Don't let me hear that again, Hyacinth, I beg you."

Whereat Hyacinth turned a *pirouette*, made a pretty *moue*, and became scarce. She was not a bit unhappy — not she! She knew that "Mamma Lee," as wicked Douglas called her, would have to give in in the end. She only ran off to look for Gabrielle, and tell her all about this, and Jessie's engagement to Clifford Brandon.

So another week or ten days passed, outwardly very quietly, very unmarked; but it was the stillness of the volcano, the calm before the storm. On all sides danger was thickening around Douglas and the self-devoted woman whose very life was so deeply, so strangely interwoven with his for weal or woe.

But so well had Gabrielle Albany played

her game, so well had her assistants, passive and active, aided her, that up to this time, when to remove Douglas abroad it became necessary to throw out, as it were, an advanced-post hint of such a change, Lady Glen-Luna had had absolutely no suspicion that the beautiful woman she had introduced with so cruel a purpose was her antagonist, no suspicion that she was so completely read by her; up till now she had no idea that Dr Neville's attendance was for anything beyond what had been given out—the injury done by the accident to the lift; up till now she had been absolutely duped by her clever antagonist into the full persuasion that Douglas was worse; a belief, which had had exactly the result Gabrielle had foreseen and intended; it had kept Adeline from again running the risk of any overt, and therefore more or less dangerous, means, as long as there was such (apparent) almost certainty of nature saving her the trouble. Now, even when she first heard from Lady

Constance the words designedly uttered by Chandos Neville, that he was soon, perhaps, going abroad with a patient, her first thought was one of triumph—"that Douglas was so much worse, so hopelessly sinking, that, as a last desperate step, they were thinking of attempting to move him." Yet this idea hardly coincided with appearances, and she was puzzled; perhaps it was not, after all, Douglas to whom the physician had alluded; perhaps he had tried all he could, failed, of course, like others, and given up the case in despair.

"I must find out," she muttered, clenching her hands; "leave this house alive he never shall. I must speak to Clifford, for his interest and mine are one."

Ay, Lady Glen-Luna, the more so that he has the strongest possible reason for not losing sight of his wife just now, or Douglas either.

That evening she found an opportunity to speak to Albany out on the terrace,

while the rest were in the drawing-room.

"Can it be possible, Clifford," she said, after telling him of Neville's remark, "that he could mean poor dear Douglas; surely, Dr Neville and Mrs Albany cannot be mad enough to dream of removing him across sea actually in his precarious state;" the woman still kept up the shallow outward mask of words to her accomplice. "I must speak to his father, he must not—shall not—allow it, Clifford!"

"Take care how you oppose," said Albany, laying his hand on her arm; "may I say what I think—"

"Go on, Clifford. I know you care for Douglas's welfare as much as I do."

"Quite," said he dryly; "well, I think, then, that you have never really gauged Mrs Albany; or, gaining one important point, you have, perhaps, missed another."

"How? What do you mean?" and Adeline started. Albany glanced down at

her, with an odd sort of sneer creeping over his mouth, as he said slowly,—

“She is a splendid chess player, Lady Glen-Luna. I was watching you both the other night when you challenged her. Lookers on, you know, see most of the game; and her play was a masterpiece. She saw your defect at once, wonderfully clever as your plan was; you, in your intentness on your own plan and reliance on your own forces, failed to take true count of hers, while she never for one moment, in carrying out her plan, lost sight of yours. I don’t think she made one move which did not at once form her own play and divert yours and your suspicions into a wrong channel. She feigned just enough of frank unsuspectingness to veil the superb subtlety it covered; and, just when your splendid *coup de main* had placed her queen and victory in your grasp, in one more move, lo! a quiet little knight moved his cross-move, and you were check-mated in

the moment of triumph. That woman is a splendid strategist; and what is life but one vast game of chess?"

Adeline stopped dead, and stood looking blankly at him, her fingers clenching and unclenching convulsively, her eyes glittering.

"Do you mean," she said, and her voice was more hard and metallic than ever, "that she has suspected—"

"*C'est ça*—seen your cards and kept her own in her hands" (how little she dreamed that he spoke from such intimate knowledge). "It is now for you to make sure whether I am right or wrong; make her throw out at least some of her cards; the mistake you have made may be as fatal as your game of chess."

She wrenched a spray vindictively from a young tree near, tore it in half, and flung it on the ground.

"That may go to keep the faded rose company still."

A savage triumph flashed up into the man's eyes, and he drew a quick, hard breath—this—this would be freedom, indeed, if only they could match that strategy and boldness which he had been forced to admit and admire. Ah, if!

“Look you, Adeline,” he said, bending down his tall form, and for the first time dropping her title, “ask Sir Arthur if he has heard of any idea of taking his son away in his critical state—for, of course, Neville's remark was meant to be repeated—then speak of the matter to Douglas, and be careful how you oppose it, if he has really made up his mind; rather, then, take it up and offer to go abroad with them; if that is negatived, it will show that I am right, as to her—ay, and his—suspicions; but remember that he can, I am certain, act as well as she can. Up to the present time it is no use, I am afraid, to blink the fact that Mrs Albany has mastered the situation as far

as you are concerned ; now it is for us to turn the tables."

"Clifford, you have thrown a bombshell at my feet !" said Adeline Glen-Luna, " but the game is worth the candle, and it will go hard but I will win it. They shall not go abroad if that is really their plan. Come back now to the others. I'll challenge her to no more play games of chess, but only play out the real one, even though it be on dangerous ground."





CHAPTER X.

A FAITHFUL FRIEND.

FOR the devoted woman, to whose very heart's core Douglas's helplessness had at once and with such irresistible force appealed, this terrible and unexpected advent of her husband on the battle ground had complicated her tactics and deepened the danger and difficulties to an extent that might well have appalled even her bold spirit, for too well she knew the desperate, utterly reckless man with whom she had now to deal as well as Adeline—in herself no despicable or scrupulous an enemy, as that lift accident had proved too surely.

She had those two, separately and as accomplices, to battle; she must arrest the *soi-disant* marriage, yet without the very means of doing so effectually, and in the face of the terrible retaliation which would be made. She was stemming an overwhelming tide single-handed, fighting unaided against odds; and her only hope, to which she bent her whole power, was to get Douglas out of the atmosphere of destruction which surrounded him within reach of those two; then the *esclandre*—the tide against herself, might crash over her. She alone knew to the full the real force of the enemy; even Douglas had no idea of the terrible interest against both his and her own life—that she was as much the one obstacle in the path of a ruthless man as he was in that of an equally hardened woman. She felt like one in the dark, with danger all around, knowing not whence the next blow would come, or when it would fall. She dared not tell

Douglas, even if he could have been of use ; the sense of his own helplessness was maddening enough to the man as it was ; her part was to ward from him, not add to, anything that could fret or pain him, or rouse his deepest, wildest passions. All he knew, his very love for her, was torture enough, she knew by her own heart, and beyond all, she dreaded lest the thin veil between their two hearts should be torn down *per saltum*. She had foreseen that the climax must come, and she be obliged to show some of her cards, whenever the time came that he was able to bear the removal abroad ; but this marriage had hastened matters terribly. Is it not too often so in warfare ?

“God keep you and rest you, dear Gabrielle,” Douglas had said only that very night when they parted. Rest ! how could she ? She did not even try, now that for a brief space she could drop the self-contained control she dared not cast aside by

day; and to and fro, to and fro her chamber she walked, hearing Harford talking to his master in his dressing-room across the corridor, answered by the soft tones of music she had learned to love so well. What wonder that she wrung those delicate hands in voiceless agony, and took no heed of how the night-watch crept on, scarce knew even when the soft murmur of those voices ceased; what wonder that she started with a sudden, wild flash of fear and passionate indignation, when presently there came a light tap at the inside door opening into her sitting-room—what if her husband had dared—

“Mrs Albany, are you undressed yet?”

William Harford's true, earnest voice! The revulsion from dread to relief was so intense that she almost staggered dizzily; the next moment she had opened the door, colourless as marble, and faced the courier.

“Mrs Albany! do you know how you

look?" the man said under his breath, as the light from the lamp she held fell on her face.

He came right into the room.

"Never mind me—your knock startled me a little; what is the matter, Harford?"

He took the lamp from her hand, and set it on the table as he answered,—

"Nothing with the master, madam, but I wanted to speak to you without his knowing it, at once, and so I ventured to steal in here when I left him. Mrs Albany, it is about this Mr Brandon I want to speak."

Gabrielle put one hand suddenly on the back of a chair near her—

"Go on," she said, "what of him?—you know you can say what you like to me Harford."

"I know—thank you; neither you nor the master, then, like him or this marriage any better than I do."

"Like him or—no."

"I hardly know, ma'am," said the courier,

looking down for a minute, "why I first felt somehow suspicious of him—quite in a vague sort of way, you know—except, perhaps, he came so completely as a friend—hand and glove—of Lady Glen-Luna, and, 'birds of a feather flock together,' the more so since he's engaged to Miss Jessie, because, of course, his interest and hers are one, to make the succession to Luna sure and quick."

Gabrielle shivered; she could have taken him up and told him more than he had ever dreamed.

"They think he is rich," she said, with that ring of bitter irony, "but he may be a mere adventurer—a dissolute *roué*."

"I quite think so, Mrs Albany; but I have heard enough to-night to make suspicion certainty; they were out on the terrace together; I chanced to see them as I was returning from visiting my sister. They were near the windows of the empty ballroom, so I turned round, softly opened

one of them a little, and bent my ear to catch, if ever so little, what they said ; everything is fair and right in the master's service."

"Quite—go on," she said, setting her teeth ; " what did you hear ? "

" Only a few words, madam, here and there, but that was enough," he said, with a gleam in his bright eyes. " I could make out that Mr Brandon was speaking of your play in a game of chess in which you won, from which he was warning her that as she played that game so she played this other. She looked angry, alarmed, stopped, he bent down ; I am certain that then some definite compact was made between them, for finally she wrenched off a spray from a shrub, tore it in half and stamped upon it, with these words : ' That may go to keep the rose company,'—a significant action and expression, Mrs Albany."

She put her hand that was not holding the chair to her brow, and drew a sharp breath that was almost a gasp.

"I think, too," said Harford, deeply pained to see such signs of an anguish which, this time, she could not quite master, "that the hint of Mr Douglas's removal will make them suspect that you have played a double part."

Gabrielle dropped her hand and faced him again. How deadly pale and haggard she was. Her mind, too powerful to be ever long in chaos, was made up. Once more pride, sensitiveness, all herself must be put aside for *his* sake.

"From the first time," she said steadily, "that Dr Neville gave us hope, and said that at a certain stage, if reached, a removal to one of the spas would be beneficial, I knew that when such a time came the risk of that woman's suspicion and opposition, open or secret, must be run and baffled, of course ; but I knew long ago what you have only recently or even just now discovered ; I have been struggling against a double tide, not from want of trust in you, faithful

friend, but—but Harford, swear that you will hold inviolate until I give you leave, what I may say.”

“Mrs Albany, it is my place to obey my master and mistress,” said the courier, internally deeply startled; “I should never for a moment have thought you mistrusted me.”

“Thank you. Swear then.”

“I swear.”

She turned abruptly from him, walked to the end of the room, then back, struggling proudly against her bitter anguish.

“When that man came down here amongst the guests, I knew that he came under utterly false colours—an adventurer, for the sole purpose of rebuilding his squandered fortunes by a marriage with the girl he means to be the heiress of Glen-Luna. I knew who and what he really was, and of an obstacle to his scheme which he cannot sweep away, but has for a time weighted so terribly that it was impossible to unmask him.”

She paused, as if to gather strength.

“Harford, that obstacle—hush, for holy Heaven’s sake!—you guess!”

“That this Brandon has a wife living,” said Harford sternly, “and the cursed villain *dares* attempt such a foul stain to the honour of Glen-Luna! But you can stop this; you say you know it.”

“I know it, to my bitterest cost!” Each word fell as if it were a drop of her life’s blood. “God help me! I am that man’s wife—Leicester Albany.”

Harford fell back a step, as if a blow had been struck him.

“Great Heaven! don’t—don’t tell me *that* is true!”

She sank on to a chair by the table, and laid her face upon it in her hands, not weeping, no tears would come to her relief, only convulsive, suppressed, dry sobs, that racked the slender form all the more terribly because they were suppressed lest, haply, Douglas should hear—always for him the

first thought—even in such bitter anguish as this.

“Hush! oh hush! It is terrible to see a young thing suffer so!” and in his earnestness Harford laid his hand on her shoulder. “My dear, don’t, for his sake!”

Did he know the full power of the plea that came so naturally? But even then it was minutes before she could lift her head and speak—brokenly then at first.

“I know all you feel; but you do not know why I have kept, still must, keep silence.” She paused for full a minute, and then, still with her face averted, though speaking more steadily, went on—“I made one terrible mistake when I was separated; I destroyed every paper connected with him, and he knew it. When he found me—his wife—here, he defied me to prove that he was Leicester Albany—my husband—and swore that if I unmasked him and claimed him as my husband, he would—just Heaven! that he should have lived to

say it!—he would claim me as having been his mistress.”

Harford suddenly put his hand over his lips to stifle the fierce exclamation that sprang to them, and muttered hoarsely,—

“If the master knew all *this*, he would kill him as I—”

“Hush!” Mrs Albany rose now, with an utterly weary movement. “You know, can see now why this forced me to feign—act total defeat—yielding until we have the master safe away from this *esclandre*. You see fully now what two desperate enemies we have to deal with, and what reason the man—*my husband*—has for sweeping out of his way, if he can, both obstacles to this marriage and the fortune.”

“I see it all, Mrs Albany.” The man’s voice was hoarse with stifled emotion and passion as he locked her slender hand in his own. “I will obey you, as I hope I have always done, because you are my dear mistress, and, for your own sake and the

master's we both love so deeply ; and I will serve you to the uttermost you may ask, because you are the most unhappy, most foully-wronged woman that man's villainy ever cursed ; but, if ever there comes a time when either the master or I can avenge your wrongs, so help me Heaven ! it will be the worse for any hand that shall try to stay us."

"That hand will never be mine, William Harford."

There was a pause, then the courier spoke in another tone, full of earnest anxiety,—

"Will you try and rest now—try to sleep ? You look so ill, poor child—so ill—and the master will see it at once—even now, I fear."

"I will try, dear, faithful friend ; good night."

"Good night, Mrs Albany, good night, my dear." In all his five-and-forty years he had found no such sorrowful a young life as this.



CHAPTER XI.

DROPPING THE MASK A LITTLE.

LADY GLEN-LUNA did not go to Douglas's rooms in order to carry out the plan suggested by her confederate, but watched till one fine morning she saw Mrs Albany wheeling the chair across the lawn, and when it stopped she took her sunshade and tripped out to them.

“Good morning, both of you,” said she ;
“what is this I hear from Lady Constance, dear Douglas?—it has quite alarmed me. What can Dr Neville be thinking of to dream of such a risk as sending you

abroad? or"—reproachfully—"you either, Mrs Albany?"

The blood flushed over Glen-Luna's brow; any allusion to his being helpless, any discussion about himself, from this woman of all people, pained and stung him almost unbearably, the more so, perhaps, this time because he knew that it was inevitable, and this even Gabrielle must permit, instead of warding it off.

"*Tiens-toi, belle-mère,*" he said lightly, "I must protect both physician and nurse from blame. Neville and Gabrielle think it may be attempted—how soon did he say?"

"About three weeks, we hope, Mr Glen-Luna."

"*C'est-ça,* and my father has as entire a reliance on both as I have. They tell me I may do as I like best," he added, dropping his head languidly back.

It flashed across Adeline with evil quickness that that was often what physi-

cians said when all skill and hope had failed, and it was only useless fretting the doomed patient to cross his wishes. His little fine bit of acting deceived her; but she saw her way to the test agreed on.

“Well, dear, if so, you will have your way, I suppose, despite the risk. But have any of you thought of— I presume you wish Mrs Albany to attend you?”

Douglas laughed outright, and Gabrielle half smiled; both saw so plainly.

“My dear Adeline, are we either of us like Juliet, ‘a stranger in the world? Neville will go with us, and Miss Neville too.”

“But, my dearest boy, that is not enough,” exclaimed Lady Glen-Luna; “Mrs Albany, you must see that for your own sake this won’t do. No, no; a capital plan has entered my head. You must stop for your sister’s marriage; *that* shall be hurried forward, and then we can all go abroad together—your father and I

and your party. Won't that be the very thing? We shall make quite a happy party."

Douglas shook his head, but Mrs Albany said quietly, with a touch of hauteur in her firm manner,—

"Pardon me, madame; but even being here under your roof has not saved me from scandal, if I had cared about it; and being myself a married woman, and Dr and Miss Neville (beside her fifty years), people of the highest repute, I consider their presence quite enough protection for my name, without the least need of disturbing your ladyship's plans, or taxing the freedom of your movements."

"But, my dear"—broke in Adeline eagerly—"it's no tax to do anything for my dear Douglas, as you must know by this time."

"Plainly, Lady Glen-Luna, then, as his attendant, answerable for his welfare to his father and physician, I must abso-

lutely put my veto upon any increase to the travelling party. Harford, Dr Neville, myself, and Miss Neville are necessary, and more than that would be far too much for Mr Glen-Luna."

For the hundredth part of a second Adeline paused; for that infinitely small space of time she had almost betrayed herself—just a flash, a look—but it escaped neither of those two. Then she laughed, shaking her finger at Mrs Albany.

"Oh, you naughty, naughty girl. Douglas is quite right to call you his autocrat. I never could get such obedience from him, I can tell you, bad boy. But my dear—"

"Well"—a slight, restless, almost fretted movement of the handsome head.

"You won't go abroad, Douglas, until after Jessie's marriage?"

He saw Gabrielle shiver—and his own brow darkened as he answered coldly,—

"I could not, and would not be present, Adeline, for every possible reason, and

therefore my movements must be quite independent of your plans."

"Oh, Douglas! poor Jessie will feel it so! She will think you don't like Clifford."

"I do not think," said Douglas, leaning back with a weary look, "that Jessie much cares whether I like Brandon or not, or whether I am present or absent from her marriage. What date have you thought of?"

"Somewhere about a month, Clifford wishes it; and, as we did not intend to make any fuss, it can be so done."

"As you will, then, Adeline; neither I nor mine will be in your way. I shall see all my pictures, books, art treasures, and so on removed from those rooms before we leave them, because the workmen are to be turned into them; for, if I live to come back again—"

"Oh, Douglas!—don't!—"

("Not badly acted," thought Gabrielle, with a sarcastic smile creeping over her lips.)

He answered with quiet sadness,—

“My life, Adeline, is not such a prize to me as to most men ; if I come back I want to see some change—something different to the colours and fittings I have seen for nearly two years.”

“Whatever you wish, dearest, of course is our law ; why not have those barred-up, empty old schoolrooms below yours done up ?”

“No, thanks. I should lose the open view, I should be shut in by the belt of trees—I could not bear it !”

“Well, dear, what you please. Ta, ta ; I see Clifford and Jessie on the terrace.”

And, kissing the tips of her fingers, she tripped away again.

Both looked after her till she met the other two figures, and then, as by one impulse, each turned, and their eyes met.

“When I leave those rooms”—said Douglas slowly—“I shall never, never come back to them, Gabrielle—never, never.”

Were those words prophetic? Are we sometimes permitted to feel, rather than see into the future, like one groping in the dark?

Was there to come a terrible hour, all too soon, when each of those two would recall those words? Merciful Heaven! was there not?





CHAPTER XII.

DEEPER AND DEEPER THE BLACK SHADOWS FALL.

“**Y**OU were right, Clifford,” said Lady Glen-Luna; they were alone in the drawing-room, before dinner, and her hand clenched on the dainty handkerchief it held,—“you were right about that woman, Mrs Albany.”

Leicester Albany drew a quick breath.

“She does suspect you, then?”

“Yes,” she said between her teeth, “if your test is infallible.”

“She would not hear of your offer to go with them?”

“She!—yes—she herself—like the autocrat he makes of her.”

“Makes! I tell you, Adeline, bah! you meant it—meant him to be her slave! if not, then you were mad to place such a woman about any man. She is as dangerous as she is beautiful.”

“Dead men tell no tales,” said Adeline, with a short laugh; “go abroad they never shall.”

“Your hand on that, Adeline, if Jessie is mine first,” said Albany, with a gleam in his black eyes. He had the game now, and meant to use it. Adeline looked at him a minute, and then, dropping her fan, put her right hand into his.”

“So be it! ways and means will suggest themselves in time—circumstances which will retard their going from here, and would also put off a marriage. I will see to it, Clifford; in three weeks it must take place.”

“Tell me what passed on the lawn, that you say three weeks so glibly.”

She told him the substance of what had passed.

"I cannot now," she concluded, "make out whether Douglas is better or worse ; I think he is worse, from many little signs, only Dr Neville, I can quite see, is one of those venturesome doctors who, when there is not much hope, are fond of rushing into bold measures."

"The kill or cure sort," said Albany with a sneer ; "it may be so, but I am suspicious of madame. She sent for him, didn't she, after that lift accident ?"

"Yes, but then there was no one to send for besides him, except that stupid Dr Orde, and of course Harford would have told her which was the best."

Albany dared not say too much about his wife lest he should arouse in Lady Glen-Luna some suspicion that he was speaking with more knowledge of her than he could well have got in the, after all, slight ac-

quaintance down here. He asked, rather abruptly,—

“What day have they fixed for their exodus? for it seems a thoroughly planned thing.”

“Mrs Albany named no day, only mentioned three weeks or thereabouts; and seemed doubtful of his coming back alive.”

Leicester laughed sardonically.

“He had better be doubtful the other way—of leaving here alive. Listen to me, Adeline; on second thoughts we will leave the date of the marriage as before—a month hence. If anything should occur a week beforehand,” he spoke slowly now, his glittering eyes fixed on hers—“any family loss or calamity, you understand—the marriage would be delayed a week, perhaps, and be quite private, of course. Do you understand?”

She blanched a little now that her own crime came before her in a second person’s

hand, but answered with that cold evil smile of hers,—

“I perfectly understand. You are quite right.”

If there were really truth in the teaching of Pythagoras, surely this woman's soul had once inhabited the body of a tiger-cat, and carried its nature with it in its transfiguration into hers.

The gossiping *coteries* of Doring had plenty to talk about and anticipate in the next fortnight with the doings and expected doings at Luna Hall.

Miss Glen-Luna was going to be married in one month, at St Agnes the Martyr, to that rich Mr Clifford Brandon—they knew it would end so, my dear—and Lady Constance and Miss Lee were to remain—yes—they had all (this from ladies) gone up to London yesterday to order the *trousseau*; while Sir Arthur and the bridegroom-elect had also gone to town—lawyers' settlements, of course. Sir Arthur had returned alone,

but Mr Brandon was coming back a week or ten days before Mr Douglas Glen-Luna went abroad. Oh, yes, it was perfectly true, my dear lady, extraordinary as the whole thing is; a very clever practitioner from Manchester was coming to take Dr Neville's place (he never had come to stop, you know), and he and his sister were going to Germany with Mr Glen-Luna and "that" Mrs Leicester Albany; just a last desperate attempt to prolong his life, poor fellow; that dear, tender-hearted Lady Glen-Luna was in a terrible way about him. And his rooms were all to be re-done, and his valuable pictures and all sorts of things he had got there were to be moved to the picture gallery before he left. *He* didn't himself think he would come back alive, Lady Glen-Luna said, with tears in her sweet eyes.

Perhaps there had been—so can a crocodile shed tears, we know.

To Albany's unhappy wife his absence—

short as it was—was a brief respite, that seemed to give her breathing time. If one load more of anxiety could be added to the weight she bore already, it was because she saw that, with each day that passed, Douglas grew more restlessly unquiet to leave “his prison,” and more deeply fretted about the coming marriage, more straining after some means of averting it.

“I don’t know why it is, Gabrielle,” he said one evening, “but there is something in this marriage which I dislike and dread beyond even my dislike to the man. It frets me terribly that I am so powerless to stop it. It was too late to do that through my father, even when he came to tell me; I would to Heaven I had some tangible proofs against him in my hand that would turn Adeline, or even poor, silly, flighty Jessie.”

Gabrielle had been seated on the foot of his sofa, reading aloud, but as he spoke she rose abruptly and walked to the other end

of the long apartment, her pulse throbbing, her heart beating heavily. Oh how heavily ! What should she do, what could she do, without stepping too far on to dangerous ground ; and yet, how could she let this constant mental wear go on utterly unrelieved, knowing so well the incalculable influence the mental has over the physical, especially in a temperament so highly strung and rendered even painfully sensitive by long confinement to every mental influence ? She felt how wistfully his eyes followed her movements, knew that he had long known that she was troubled, and took a middle course, for hers was a mind too strong and decided to ever remain long in a state of doubt. She came back to him, and said, in that suppressed way of hers that always to him told of such a world of passion sternly controlled,—

“ Give me your honour not to ask me any questions about what I mean, or how I mean : not one, and I will set your anxiety

about Jessie's marriage at rest. I cannot see you do yourself such harm."

How he started and flushed; then sank back again.

"Dear Gabrielle—I am nothing but a trouble to you."

"Hush; I wish all troubles, then, were like you," she could not help saying, half under her breath; "give me your *gage d'honneur*, then."

"You hold it in your right hand, Gabrielle," he said, and clasped it in his own; "take that load away from the other if you can; I will ask nothing."

Standing there at his side, her hand held in his, her dark eyes steadily meeting his, Albany's wife said firmly,—

"Hear this, then, and be at rest. This marriage will never take place."

"Gabrielle!"

"It is as true as I am standing here. However near it may seem, even to the very altar, it will never take place."

“Thank God! oh! thank God!”

He covered his face, and so lay quite still for a long time; and Gabrielle turned away to the window with heaving breast, and struggling to crush back the bitter tears that welled up from the poor, racked heart; so strong and grand in its very weakness of tender, sensitive womanhood—ay, in its matchless power to bear and suffer for the one loved being.

She had mastered herself before Douglas spoke again.

“I take your assurance in absolute faith, Gabrielle, and, whatever I may think or fancy, keep silence till you choose to speak more. You know that Brandon returns here to-morrow?”

“Yes; Hyacinth told me that there had been a letter from him this morning. Your father came up here, just as I left to ride over to Sister Rose, did he not?”

“Ay; it seems that he and Brandon are going to run up to town to finally arrange

the settlements—get the special licence and so forth—next Wednesday, returning on Thursday,—just the week before we leave.”

“They had better burn the settlements and licence!” said Mrs Albany, with bitter irony, “for all are waste paper. For our own arrangements, I have settled everything, both with our sweet Sister Rose and here—”

“You and Harford—well? pardon my interruption—”

“These rooms will be dismantled of all but the furniture on Tuesday next; the piano and your secrétaire go to the library; the pictures, statues, and books which we do not take, go, as you wished, to the little picture gallery in the east wing. Our luggage and the Nevilles’, with the carriage and horses, will all be sent on to town with Marston and James, straight on board your yacht, and there will be nothing to trouble us on the Thursday but ourselves. Harford

is a host in himself. Of course, the chair and Angus go with us."

"Dear Gabrielle, how splendidly you have arranged everything! and to give you such trouble—for me."

She touched his lips, and said quietly,—

"For you—my one charge, one thought—nothing is trouble."

In his heart's core surely he knew that long ago, as she was his one thought. He smiled up at her, and added,—

"And it was you who even thought of crossing in my own dear yacht, because you knew how I loved it! Oh, Gabrielle, I am nearly wild, I think, with looking, looking on and thinking of this, more than hope you and Chandos give; I can see"—he started half up, his dark eyes all glowing with light, his speaking features, his whole form quivering with emotion—"I see the yacht, I hear them getting up the steam if the breeze should drop; the wind is filling her white canvas now as she dances on the deep blue

seas, the white horses are out as I saw them last; see myself standing on the deck with you—you at my side—all this past misery and agony of doubt and death around is growing a dark dream—O my God! it is too much! it cannot all come true!” he broke out suddenly, passionately, and almost flinging himself back, buried his face in the cushions.

One second’s pause, one second’s fierce battle against untold agony and temptation, and then the noble woman who so loved him, bent over him, laid her soft hand on the bowed head, and breathed a deep passionate prayer.

“God save thee from all danger and sorrow! God keep thee for ever and ever.”

Then he heard the door close, and knew that he was alone, if ever the human heart is alone that gives and holds a pure and noble love.

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So the days passed by, one by one, drop-

ping off the tablets of time ; marked out from life's scroll ; leaving behind it to the future each its load of sin and care and misery ; and the right hand that once wrote these words might write them again in letters of blood,—

“ Ill deeds will rise,
Though all the world o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.”





CHAPTER XIII.

A GULF AT HIS FEET.

AND then that Thursday came ;
the week before Douglas Glen-
Luna's departure, the fortnight
before the projected marriage of Jessie.

There were, it seemed, several feminine "fripperies" yet to be purchased, and Lady Glen-Luna, declaring she was not equal to a day's shopping, begged Lady Constance to go with the girls, as Mrs Albany could not, she knew—and, indeed, ought not—to leave "dear Douglas" for a whole day. Lady Constance good-naturedly consented, and the ten o'clock up-train took herself, Hyacinth, and Jessie to town—not probably

to return till dinner-time. But Sir Arthur Glen-Luna and his son-in-law elect returned in time for luncheon. They walked up from the station to the Hall, and, as they approached the stately façade and broad terrace, Sir Arthur caught sight of his son and his two rarely absent attendants—Mrs Albany and Angus. So did Leicester see them, but he had little wish to nearer quarters, though, as Sir Arthur immediately changed his course, Albany could hardly do less than follow, though, sooth to say, under present conditions he felt in his wife's presence very much like a "cat on hot bricks," not because his brazen effrontery had failed, or that he was capable of shame, but because, try as he would to feel that *he* was master of the situation, he could not crush a vague fear of her—a dim, uncomfortable feeling that somehow the game might not turn out so entirely his; he knew her haughty courage, her bold spirit, and her never-forgotten words

months ago, "Whatever you do, I will foil you."

Sir Arthur was, of course, warmly greeted—himself courteously but coldly, and he fancied that in Douglas's manner there was more *hauteur* than usual.

"Come and lunch with us to-day, dear boy," said Sir Arthur; "if only to give us the company of this fair lady, as all are absent except my little wife. And, besides, we shall want you afterwards—eh, Clifford?"

"Oh, Sir Arthur, we need not trouble them; any one can just witness the signing of a deed."

"What deed, father?" said Douglas quietly.

"Only Clifford's settlement on your little sister," returned the baronet, with a laughing glance at Albany; "you will come in then, Douglas—and you, my dear?"

"We will come, since you wish it, dear father," Glen-Luna answered, and Gabrielle

bowed assent, "only you will have to kindly allow us to retreat to our rooms in good time, as we expect the Nevilles to dinner, I fancy"—he smiled now—"that the two ladies have a few details of the journey to arrange."

"You shall go when you like, my boy. Come Clifford; we have all the dust to get rid of."

If it had been possible to dispense with his wife's presence at that luncheon, Leicester Albany would fain have done so. She was as easy, as brilliant, as fascinating as ever—but he felt that she knew he was not at his ease, strive as he would to be so—to seem so. He did not know that Douglas was equally aware of the fact that his gaiety was forced, though Gabrielle was, and more than once she noticed a momentary stern expression about his lips which startled her.

Sir Arthur, perfectly innocent of all the turbid currents around him, sat and chatted,

so bright and happy in his green old age, that it made two of those present heavy-hearted, indeed, with the thought that he might—ay, perhaps, must—one day know the skeleton on his own hearth.

“How we have chatted,” said Lady Glen-Luna, at length, in her pretty manner. “I suppose we had better adjourn to the library; doesn’t it seem a shame, dear Mrs Albany,” she added, laughing as she rose, “that in this life one cannot have romance and sentiment without that stupid, prosaic business—business always forcing its way in? Such a pity, isn’t it?”

“I think that real romance is not so much as touched by the prosaic necessities of daily life,” returned Mrs Albany, laying her hand on the back of Douglas’s chair to move it.

Albany turned with outstretched hand,—

“Nay, Mrs Albany, permit me; I think there is a step up into the library!”

She put his hand back with such stern

menace in the action, and one glance she gave him, that an instant quiver of dread ran through him.

"That, then, Mr Brandon," she said deliberately, "is the more reason for me not to desert my post. I am used to it and you are not, and do not realise, perhaps, how harmful would be the least jerk, or want of skill. Sir Arthur, we will follow you, please."

"Oh, you naughty autocrat," laughed Adeline, as Sir Arthur threw wide the door and led the way, but the laugh was not good to hear, and the voice was more metallic than ever, "I don't know how Douglas will put up with you abroad; better leave you behind, my dear."

"I could not spare her, I think," said Douglas, with a deep earnestness under the jesting tone which went to the heart of the woman who had loved him first—woman-like—for his very need of her tenderness and care, "and I think, too, that she is as

restless and glad to spread her wings again as I am."

As he said that they passed from the hall into the library at the far end of it, and at a sign from Sir Arthur his attendant drew the chair up alongside the large solid table in the centre, and Albany, entering last, closed the door carefully, then came forward too.

There was a pause—an odd sort of mental lull—such as we feel in the elements before a storm. The dog—and how instantly these dear four-footed friends of ours are alive to the mental atmosphere around them only those who love and watch them can know—the dog looked from one to the other, licked his master's hand, and looked again at Leicester Albany, then suddenly growled.

"Silence, Angus, lie down, boy."

Instant obedience, but he laid his head on his master's foot, and kept his bright watchful eyes on his master's face.

Lady Glen-Luna asked pleasantly—

“Well, but what are we waiting for, Arthur? Is the settlement here, Clifford?”

He bowed, with a furtive glance at his wife, who stood beside Douglas, resting her hand lightly on the back of his wheel-chair.

“Sir Arthur, you put it into a drawer here, I think; shall I take it out?”

“Certainly; that drawer near you. Douglas and Mrs Albany will kindly be the witnesses to your signature; it is only, you know, his marriage settlement on Jessie.”

“Only!”—the beautiful woman whose life he had wrecked stood motionless as a statue outwardly, but within the volcano was seething wildly; the fierce forces of the woman’s whole strong, impassioned nature were surging madly now like a tempest-tossed mass of waters against the barriers she had raised up around them; the sternest self-control has its limits, and hers had well nigh reached that point, one touch more—

one spark flung too defiantly against her—and let that black-browed man beware, and remember her last menace:—“If I fall, I will not fall alone.”

“A formidable-looking document isn’t it?” said Sir Arthur, as Albany unrolled a parchment on the table near Douglas, and took up a pen. In that second, even as he stooped to sign, some irresistible impulse made him glance nervously, furtively at his wife, as she still stood at Douglas’s right hand—her left hand lying on the arm of the chair, which was close to the table, and, of course, between her and the table.

She looked straight in his face, into his bold black eyes, and they dropped suddenly, a red flush leaped to his swarthy cheek, to his very brow, and he bent quite low as he signed the name—“Clifford Brandon.”

Douglas saw all this, and set his white teeth close for his promise’ sake as Albany handed him the pen. He had been leaning back as if weary, and now bent forward

slowly, drew the parchment closer, and pausing, looked up suddenly into Gabrielle's white set face.

“*Places aux dames* ; will you sign first ?” he said.

“No ; I will follow the heir of Glen-Luna.”

He stooped at once and dashed off the free, easy signature she knew so well, then, leaning back, put the pen into Gabrielle's hand.

It was one of those moments in which the whole balance of our lives hangs on the cast of a feather's weight into the scale. She did not leave her position, but leaned slightly across Douglas and dipped the pen in the ink—touched the parchment, almost formed a G, paused, and let the pen drop on the deed. With a fierce gleam in his black eyes, losing for the moment of anger perfect guard, Albany instantly raised the pen, and, bending to restore it, whispered the menacing words :—

“Remember, and sign.”

The hour had come ; it was the one touch too much, and the pen was flung from the hand that held it.

“ I will *not* sign my name or set my seal to so foul a lie, so black a deed, as this.” She took the parchment and rent it in two as the words passed her lips. “ To which you dared not affix your real name ; you who, base adventurer to the last, have crept and crawled to a stainless house, to steal away its daughter’s honour for the gold her hand may bring you ! Look upon him, you two knightly men—father and son”—she laid her left hand heavily on Douglas’s shoulder, mindful, even in her passion of wrath and scorn, that her words would make him spring to his feet in the next moment—“ who never yet sullied a woman’s honour by even a glance, and ask him if he dare deny that he has betrayed your hospitality, and like the reptile, would sting to death the hand that fed it, the life given for his dastard life — ask him if he dare deny that

he is my wedded husband!—Leicester Albany!”

“I guessed this, and, by the God above! he shall answer for it! Drop your hand, Gabrielle!”

The whole force of the man's deep passions, the whole strength of his fierce, stern wrath, so long smouldering, blazed forth in that moment, and but for the dear hand he could not violently throw off Douglas had sprung to his feet and wrecked all hope for himself in the one blow that would have levelled Albany with the ground; but almost as she answered, “I will not drop it,” Sir Arthur, on whom her accusation had fallen like a thunderbolt, recovered himself and strode forward, while Lady Glen-Luna still stood like one utterly dumbfounded.

“In Heaven's name what am I to understand by this? What have you to say to this charge? Speak, man, and clear the mystery if you can!”

"Douglas," came Adeline's voice, hoarse with real terror now, "keep the dog down, for pity's sake!"

For the dog had crouched for a spring, with drawn lips and quivering flanks; but it was only for his father's sake that his master uttered one stern, "Down, Angus!" as Albany spoke. He had only lost his effrontery for one minute.

"The mystery, Sir Arthur," he said, sternly, "and the explanation of that lady's extraordinary claim to be my wife is simple enough, and my mistake in it lies in the fact that I have too long and entirely kept silence respecting who and what she is, out of consideration for her as a woman, because it seemed to me unmanly, and least of all, perhaps, *my* place to betray her past life. I was, I confess, utterly taken aback when I found Mrs Albany in your house, but when I yielded to her prayer for my silence in the very first evening I came, and passed my word to keep her secret, I little dreamed the

monstrous fraud she would attempt to prevent my marriage. I, Clifford Brandon, only a few years ago her lover, with whom she left her husband and lived—”

“Forsworn coward! Liar to your teeth!” Douglas broke in with a passion that shook him to the centre, “if even all your false story were true, no gentleman—no man—would have sheltered himself at the expense of betraying even his mistress! Father—”

Albany interposed,—

“Mr Glen-Luna, I forbear to retaliate or take notice of your harsh words and instant belief in this charge, both because you are—”

“I neither ask nor take even real, much less affected consideration for what I am now, Leicester Albany. I see all. I was suspicious of you from the first, as your wronged wife and my courier Harford very well know. I know well enough that ‘good’ introductions can be bought by such men as you, like all else, and I tell you that if I had been what I was before the accursed

hour in which I saved your worthless life, you would never have set foot across my father's threshold."

"And now," said Sir Arthur, pointing sternly to the door, "cross it once more and for ever, Mr Albany. I have been blind, deceived, and why your wife did not at once speak I do not now ask. No, Adeline, not a word. Nor you, sir. Your very defence, as my son truly says, damns your veracity. And nothing but this lady's own confession (if that) would make old Arthur Glen-Luna believe that she was anything but purity itself, or had ever been anything but wedded wife to any living man!"

Now for the first time the firm hand still pressed on Douglas's shoulder trembled; for the first time the stern set lips quivered, but she mastered even that slight mark of emotion as Albany said haughtily,—

"Common justice, Sir Arthur, would better become a Glen-Luna than a high-sounding sentiment from you and your own

son, a defence of the lady which, to the most impartial ear, can hardly be much to her credit. I ask you in my turn to challenge her most audacious claim, ask her for her proofs that I am other than Clifford Brandon; has she any paper, any likeness of this Leicester Albany?"

"I will answer those questions direct, my husband," said his wife steadily; and, do what he would, he drew back a step and dropped his insolent gaze before the steadfast look of those magnificent eyes. "It was your knowledge that I had destroyed all such papers and likeness of you which put this foul scheme to win a rich bride into your brain. I told you this in London, that I would foil you, that you should never wreck in any way another young life as you have mine. Yet you dared, with money won at play, and how else you best know, to carry out your plan, trusting that you could foil me. You came here, saw me drive past with Mr Glen-Luna, and sent me

a letter under a subterfuge. I met you that once in the park that night, with the dog for my protection"—how Douglas started at that—"and you swore then that if I betrayed your identity you would repudiate me as your wife and claim me as your mistress. I shrank from that at that moment. I wanted to gain time, and I played a part. I feigned to yield, made the compact, and let you in your folly dream that you were secure, that I would actually stand by and suffer you to go through the worse than farce of wedding Jessie Glen-Luna. Fool! You at least should have known me better. For your identity as Leicester Albany, money and time can prove it. There are men in San Francisco who will surely remember the tragedy *there*, and swear to both of us; there are men at Monaco who—"

"Stop child," exclaimed Sir Arthur, and Douglas touched her lips, "you shall not, need not, defend yourself; he has con-

demned himself, and it is he must prove, not you. For you, sir, you have dared to offer to my child and her family the grossest insult, the most foul betrayal, of which a man could be guilty ! In an hour a carriage shall be ready to take you to the station."

He turned his back upon him, and rang the bell, but though Adeline, who long ago had covered her face weeping, Leicester Albany as he went out of the library to his own apartment, foiled, scorned, beaten back, for the time blinded with baffled fury, yet knew that one in that house dared not, could not, now join against him, and would not if she could.

They must walk the dangerous ground together once and for all.





CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER THE STORM ; A THREATENING SKY STILL.

“**I**T will break Jessie’s heart,” sobbed Lady Glen-Luna, as the door closed behind Leicester Albany.

“It is a horrible dream!—it cannot be true! I don’t know what to think or say! I am distracted!”

Douglas’s lip curled, and Gabrielle Albany, picking up the rent parchment, said, sternly,—

“Jessie had better thank God for the narrow escape she has had, even if that man had been free to wed. I could wish my bitterest foe no worse fate than to be Leicester Albany’s wife. Sir Arthur, to

you and your son I am more indebted than I can speak." The voice faltered, and she turned hurriedly, put her hands on the wheel-chair and moved it towards the door. All her thought and attention was for her charge again—if, indeed, for one moment it had ever been secondary ; for him she still bore up ; and as the footman opened the door in answer to the bell they passed out into the hall, and thence through the long corridor back to the west wing, where Harford was waiting—a little to her surprise.

"I was not far off, madame," he said quietly. "I knew what might happen when that waste paper was signed, and thought it best to be near. She told me all, sir, nights ago."

And then the lift went up, and once more they were back in their own domain, and Douglas moved to his sofa. He was exhausted—for the fierce tempest cannot sweep over the land and leave it scathless,

and for him there was all the added agony of knowing how she—the woman he loved—suffered, of knowing that such a despicable yet impassable barrier stood between them.

“Gabrielle—Gabrielle, if you had but told me at the first!” he said, passionately, as Harford left them.

Her breast heaved, she struggled desperately for a minute for control, then dropped suddenly to her knees beside the couch, and burst into wild terrible weeping—ay, tears such as men sometimes weep. All the long suppressed, long crushed, pent up weight of months gathered up now and broke over every dyke and swept all before it but the one sense of honour—of wifehood.

No word dared Douglas trust himself to speak, save the silent language he could not help, the silence, the soft touch of his hand to her head, her brow, that both spoke such a volume of love—a deep loyal love that could bear, suffer with her suffering, but

never sully, never wound, and presently she grew more calm.

"Forgive me," she whispered brokenly at last, "it was for your sake—forgive me."

And then she kissed his hand, and rising went out of the room, leaving him alone—to bury his face from the light that seemed to mock his fierce agony—and yet through all his guardian angel gathered out of the chaos of passion and misery the one wild prayer, "Give me strength to bear all — without sin against Thee and her I love!"

Was ever such cry for help cast back unheard on the agonised human heart? We know it never is—never—never to all eternity.

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It was a strange and utterly unlooked for story that Chandos Neville and Sister Rose had to learn, when later they came; and then Rose put her arms round

Gabrielle and held her close — close for minutes.

“My darling!—my poor child!—God help you to be loyal still,” she whispered, “for it is a hard battle for both of you.”

Ah, who knew that so well as they did who had the battle to fight out unto the end?

While Leicester Albany, declining the services of Sir Arthur’s valet, was packing his portmanteau, a letter was brought him from Lady Glen-Luna. He smiled, sneeringly, as he broke it open.

“I cannot believe Mrs Albany’s story, though I am obliged to go with the tide, apparently—go away they shall not. Take your ticket to London, but stop at Langbourne; go to the inn near the station, under some *nom-de-guerre*, and meet me to-morrow night at twelve in the park, at the spot where Jessie introduced you to Douglas. Langbourne is only three miles, but be very careful, for Harford goes there often to see

a sick sister, and will certainly go shortly before Thursday—perhaps on the Wednesday before it.”

“*Eh, bien !* my lady ; you shall be obeyed,” muttered Albany ; “ whichever you believe, you know that you must keep my side of the fence. Death ! We can have vengeance if all were lost. And it is not. Free I can get Jessie to elope, and these broad lands must come to her. Ten thousand curses on Gabrielle, and the day her beauty tempted me ! ”

As the words were uttered there suddenly flashed across him the memory of the words that that beautiful wife had spoken once when he had threatened that which he had now done,—“ God of Justice hear me, this man’s most wronged, most miserable wife, call down Thy just vengeance on his deeds.”

He remembered her look, her very accent, and shuddered for one second, then muttered a blasphemous oath. He cared “ not for

God or for devil—if there were either !” He would have revenge and foil Gabrielle yet.

Ah, me ! but curses come home to roost.

Long after a brougham had taken him to the station Lady Constance and the two girls returned from town. Hyacinth afterwards told Chandos that the moment she entered the house she felt that something had happened, though she had never in the least looked for anything so terrible as the truth.

Jessie went into violent hysterics. The girl liked “ Clifford Brandon,” and not unnaturally, even in her hysterics, declared her belief in his story, and hate of that “ horrible Mrs Albany.” Indeed, so long continued were Jessie’s hysterics that both Sir Arthur and her mother—who dared not whisper to her yet one word that *she* was on his side too—were glad to remember that Dr Neville was in the west wing, and sent for him at once. He very soon put

an end to the hysterics, and ordered the exhausted patient to bed.

Gossip was, of course, rife in the servants' hall. Sir Arthur had simply sent for the old housekeeper and told her to tell the servants that it had happily been discovered in time that Mr Brandon was not what he had appeared at all, but a thorough adventurer, and already a married man, and with this information speculation had food enough. The footman who had answered the library bell, and seen the torn deed, said he fancied that somehow it was either Mr Douglas or Mrs Albany who had found it out, and as to the dear dog, he never could bear that Mr Brandon, or my lady either, for that matter. Angus had just looked then as if for half a mind he'd pull Mr Brandon down.

"I wish he had," said Marston, Douglas's own groom, who happened to be present, "for I'm sure he deserved it." Marston, putting two and two together, had a

shrewd idea, which came pretty near the truth, but he held his tongue discreetly till he should confide his idea to Harford. When he did so, the courier's grave, "You are right, Marston; keep still the silence for which I must give you your due praise; silence is golden. I shall tell the master and mistress," was sufficient reward to the man. He was devoted to his master and mistress, for Douglas's servants had long quite considered Gabrielle in that light, and a look, a word of praise, from either was more than gold.





CHAPTER XV.

DARK HOURS.

CONSTERNATION fell on Doring, to which, of course, the news from the Hall spread next day in a more or less garbled form, but the main facts they got, for a wonder, truly enough—that the dashing Clifford Brandon was a frightful scamp, a mere adventurer, and a married man into the bargain—so that there would be no marriage at Luna this time; no wonder Miss Glen - Luna was ill. Then, of course, Mrs Orde and Miss Chattaway discovered that *they* had never quite liked the looks of that Mr Brandon—they were not at all surprised

at the end of it all—the wretch! they supposed it would not delay the departure of Mr Glen-Luna at all—oh no, why should it? and Mrs Albany would take care of that, my dear.

Poor Mrs Albany! they had never forgiven her for paying no heed to their venomous tongues. Then the new doctor from Manchester arrived at the Cedars, and gave the gossips another topic to wag their tongues over, and you may be sure they made the most of it.

But who knew of that midnight meeting under the grand old trees? who knew of the terrible compact made, the fell deed there matured—a deed so dark and desperate, that it was scarcely possible to foresee and guard against it?

Chandos Neville — very anxious about both his charge and Gabrielle after such a trial as yesterday—drove up to the Hall earlier than usual on the Friday morning.

“I find you, Mrs Albany, looking very

much as if you needed my care as much as Douglas ;” said the physician, walking into the now much dismantled apartment. “ I shall be very glad when Thursday comes.”

“ God knows, so shall I !” said Albany’s wife, half under her breath ; “ it is impossible to feel one moment’s rest or freedom from deadly anxiety as long as we are under this roof. Ah, *mon ami*, don’t look at me so reproachfully—he has just been scolding me, Dr Neville, so much, for being over anxious about him, but I know too well what that man Leicester Albany is, what his accomplice is. I do not believe Leicester is in London—nor does Mr Glen-Luna ; and, after that lift accident and all that has followed, we all, bitter as it is, know too well what Lady Glen-Luna is. How can I feel easy for one moment on your account then ? ”

Douglas made no answer, but Chandos saw that his lips, his very teeth, were set

close. His anxiety for the woman he loved equalled hers for him. Neville asked—

“Have either of you any idea—any suspicion, then, what they are about, or intend to attempt?”

“No,” said Douglas; “we can only be on our guard; the days will soon pass—only—oh, Chandos! Chandos!” he broke out suddenly, passionately—“it maddens me to be so helpless when she is in danger! Why did you keep me back yesterday, Gabrielle? I would have killed him where he stood!”

“And wrecked your own more than life for ever,” she said, laying her hand on his. “I kept you back to save you against yourself. For me, I could bear all; but to see you suffer—get worse than ever—that would kill me! I had never meant to speak till we had left England—but the tide rose too fast—circumstances put it beyond my entire control.”

“And,” said Douglas, keeping her hand

still in his clasp, "some suspicion of the truth had flashed across me, giving the keynote to many a little thing I had noticed and been puzzled by, fine actress as you were, but he did not act up to you."

"I know that. Dr Neville, are you going to see Jessie to day?"

"Presently; when I have attended to Douglas. Where is Harford?"

Rarely far from his master, Gabrielle rang the bell, and while they waited, Chandos said,—

"By the way, Rose and I are going to dine as a farewell with the Rosslyns on Wednesday, at Rosslyn Grange. They wanted us to stay the night, but we declined that, as we are to join you here at ten on Thursday; so we shall drive back, I suppose, between twelve and one. We can take the short cut through the Great Park, I suppose?"

"Oh yes; I am glad you are going there;

they are capital people. Tell my dear Rose not to flirt with Percy too much."

"Ha, ha! I'll tell her. Here comes Harford."

"And my nainsell too," said a sweet voice behind the courier, and in walked Hyacinth Lee, flushing a little, but more with pleasure than bashfulness. "Here I am."

Neville turned quickly, locking her hand in his, as Harford quietly wheeled his master into the dressing-room.

"My dear Hyacinth! my darling! this is unexpected."

"Of course it is, you best of old fellows," but the sweet lips that tried to be saucy quivered, as he stooped to kiss them; "though I ran up to see how dear Gabrielle and Mr Glen-Luna were, after—after that miserable yesterday."

"Not what I would wish, my dear," he answered gravely; "but I must go to him now."

"And Hyacinth will stop with me till you

come in again," said Mrs Albany quietly, as he passed out.

"How is Jessie, *ma chère*?"

"Dear Gabrielle, please don't think me cruel, but I do not, cannot, believe that she is as broken-hearted as she fancies, or pretends, or is really ill enough to keep her room. Don't you think so?"

Mrs Albany put her two hands on the girl's shoulders, and the tears came heavily into the sorrowful, dark eyes that looked down on her.

"Hyacinth, you may perhaps think that my own terrible experience has seared me, has made me cynical—and so possibly it has; nor is it to any but just yourself and those few here dear to both of us to whom I would speak, since it is my husband who has put such foul insult on Jessie Glen-Luna; and I, his wife, knowing all, yet—no matter how urgent my reason—suffered the wrong to go so far that when of necessity the storm broke it could not break in secret.

But that Jessie's heart suffers would be to presuppose she has one, and for that she is too thoroughly her mother's child to fear. No girl with a woman's heart at all could possibly have neglected so utterly, so cruelly, such a man as her brother, ill and helpless as he was. That her vanity is wounded to the bottom, that she is *chagrinée* beyond measure at the sudden reversal of all her bridal visions I know, but feel no pity, no regret, hard as it may seem. But mark you, Hyacinth, if you had been the heiress selected, and I had dreamed for one moment that you could be attracted, you who have a heart to be won or broken—or both—I call Heaven to witness that the night I met Leicester Albany in this park my answer to his scheme and threat would have been to let loose upon him this dog at my feet. I would to Heaven that I had now!" she said, with a dark look that startled Hyacinth.

"Oh, Gabrielle! don't, don't say that, dear! It would have been murder!"

“Would it, girl?” said the other sternly; “is blood for blood murder, or God’s own law? You do not know that man’s life, or what is in his black heart now, as I do. Ah, Hyacinth, Hyacinth, your mother does not know what she is doing in trying to part you from such a man as Chandos Neville; your marriage will be but passing from one happy, loving home, to another yet happier.”

And hers had been but the passing from a prison to a very hell. Woe had been the day that saw her a bride!





CHAPTER XVI.

NEVILLE'S DREAM IS FULFILLED.

WELL, well; so those days passed by, one by one, in that sort of lull which comes after a storm—and too often before another—a heavy mental atmosphere which weighed vaguely even on those who never even dreamed of all that lay under the surface of the waters. Jessie still kept her room and the heartbroken business, and eagerly accepted an invitation kindly sent by Lady Saltoun, to pay them a long visit the week after Douglas's departure abroad.

Near him she never went, and begged that nobody should speak of "that Mrs

Albany" in her presence, unless they meant to insult her. Lady Glen-Luna purred about as usual, mildly reproved her daughter for allowing her heart to blind her too much, and inquired tenderly each day, through Sir Arthur, after "dearest Douglas and Mrs Albany," adding sometimes with a soft sigh, that she was glad she "had not the responsibility of moving him in his critical state."

Hyacinth was constantly with the tenants of the west wing, and drove out with them on the Tuesday. On the Wednesday the travellers' luggage and the carriage and horses were sent on to town with Marston and James, to go straight on board the yacht.

Wednesday! their last evening, heavy, oppressive, brooding. In the afternoon, while Sir Arthur was chatting with his son and Gabrielle, Harford came in with a letter from his sister, Mrs Bevan, who was much better, and, it being her brother's last evening in England for perhaps many months,

had asked in a few friends for a little farewell meeting. Could Mr Douglas spare him, and, if so, might he bring Angus, with whom her two children had made such a playmate while he was at the old farrier's in Langbourne ?

"Certainly, Harford ;" said Douglas cordially, "I am too glad for you to have a little pleasure ; take Angus by all means, and stop till the last train."

"Oh no, sir ; that leaves at 11.30."

"*Eh, bien ! mon cher,*" Douglas smiled and glanced significantly at Mrs Albany, "I can spare you till twelve, or as late as you like. If you come before the last train, Harford, we shall not speak to you."

Harford smiled, called the collie, who seemed rather loth to go, and retired. Half-an-hour later William Harford crossed the threshold of that west wing on his way to the station, and crossed it for the last time.

His sister had got a little party together, but for all, the man was anxious and heavy

at heart about those he had left, even for those few hours, and almost wished he had not come; although, when, as it were, he reasoned it to himself, he thought that their watchfulness must have foiled whatever intentions their foes had had. Still he was glad when the time came to take leave and step down to the station.

The gate was shut, but the clerk was standing by and turned round.

"You won't get back this way, Mr Harford, for two hours at least," said he; "they've just wired along the line there's been a slight accident five miles up rail, and nothing can pass for two hours till they've cleared the road."

"Malediction!" said Harford strongly, and paused for a minute; "well, I suppose that all this stupid little village is asleep by now?"

"Rather," said the clerk, showing his watch; "a quarter to twelve may be your London hours, Mr Harford, but they aren't

ours you see. You might perhaps get a horse,"—this dubiously.

"Bah ! man, nothing so quick now as the Mary-le-bone stage," returned the courier, swinging round. "Good night. I'll walk the three miles in quicker time than it'll take to shake a stick. This way, Angus ; home to the master, boy."

The dog bounded off, the man stepped out at a swinging pace, more vexed, more vaguely uneasy than he dared to put into words, even to himself.

It was a very dark night, but Harford knew every step of the way as well as in broad day, and, moreover, meant to get over the park palings, and make a short cut. But presently, long before he neared that point, the dog suddenly stopped, whined uneasily, looking in Harford's face with eyes that all but spoke, then pulled his hand, ran a few paces quickly, whined piteously again, and while the man's face blanched, and his very heart sickened with

deadly apprehension, the collie threw up his head with one wild, prolonged bay, and sprang forward at full speed.

“My God ! they have been murdered, and the dog’s instinct knows it !” broke from Harford’s livid lips, and he sprang madly forwards.

But all his speed could not by a hundred-fold equal that of the dog ; he heard him for a few minutes crashing through the grass and underwood, and then even that was lost.

On, on, in the terrible race, for he knew not what, it may be life or death or only to gain time, but dogs have presentiments, and Angus had gone. Harford gains the park ; he is over the paling, high as it is ; there is still a long distance between him and those two he has left, and his flying steps seem to himself as if weighted with lead. Great Heaven ! what is that sound that suddenly booms out over the still, darkened country—one heavy stroke ? *only*

one, that for the second seems almost to paralyse him, *only one stroke* of the alarm bell in the west wing!

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Chandos Neville and Sister Rose dined that evening, as he had said, at the Rosslyns', and a most pleasant evening they spent.

"They are such nice people," said Rose, leaning back in their phaeton as, somewhere about eleven, it drove off, "homeward bound."

"Very. And poor Percy is so furious with that villain—you see he introduced him—that he swears he'll have him black-balled at the Polyglot at once. Rose, I fancy that Colonel Rosslyn half guesses that he is Mrs Albany's husband. I wish to-morrow was well over, and so, I am sure, does she."

"Poor young thing," said Rose, in deep pity, "her burthen is too heavy to be borne long. The anxiety of this last week especially has been terrible!"

"I wish to Heaven!" said Neville strongly, "that she had put a bullet into the scoundrel in California! only it would have been too quick a death for him."

"Oh, hush, Chandos; blood is an awful thing to have on one's head."

"I don't think his would have lain heavy on Gabrielle's, Rose; and I don't see why it should. Men morally forfeit the right to life for some things which law reckons less than life."

"Yes, dear," said Rose; "but it is a dangerous precedent for each individual to begin deciding where that moral right is forfeited and where it remains existent."

"H'm," said Chandos, "you must argue that out with Gabrielle, sweet sister mine; I think if ever a reptile deserved putting out of the world, it is Leicester Albany."

"So do I, my dear, but it is not for any one of us individually to do it; unless, of course, in self defence, as poor Gabrielle shot that other villain. Where are we

now? Did you tell John to take the cut through Luna Park?"

"Yes; he knows the right turning to take, luckily, for, it is such a dark night. I wonder wherabouts we are exactly?"

"Not very far from the approach to this extremity of the park, I should think," remarked Sister Rose; "see if you can tell, Chandos. Are those the trees of the Owl's Wood?"

Neville looked up.

"Why we have just passed into the park!" he said. "One of the gamekeepers must have seen the carriage coming, for he is shutting the gate behind us. We shall soon be out of the wood."

"I wish," said Rose, "that we could metaphorically get as easily out of the wood; I suppose—I hope—by this time to-morrow we shall be on the yacht 'over the deep blue waters."

"I hope so, dear Rose, but—Aha! Merciful Heaven! what is that?"

The same awful sound—the one deep, heavy boom of that alarm-bell, like one clarion note of death, heard right in Doring, startling those whose duty kept them watching, rousing those who slept, heard far and near, miles off, yet in the very ear, that one stroke sounded like one last cry of despair.

“Drive for your life, man!” Neville cried, standing right up in the phaeton, while Rose sat white and motionless; “drive for life and death, for something awful has happened at the Hall!”

On! on! Are the minutes weighted with lead, and each second dragged into an hour? Does that fearful nightmare dream of his long ago come suddenly back to Chandos Neville now—that dream of a surging crowd and thick darkness like a wall. Saints above! Is that it now rolled out before his gaze, away ahead in the direction of the Hall? Is that a mass of dense, black clouds—on, nearer, nearer.

Do clouds lower so low and roll over like that in great black volumes, or glow with such lurid light behind them? Do clouds ever shoot up such a sudden, frightful glare against the sky as—

“Rose! Great God! THE WEST WING IS ON FIRE!”





CHAPTER XVII.

DOOMED.

THE evening, after Harford had gone, closed in heavy and lowering, and the night came on intensely dark and strangely oppressive. Within, the beautiful rooms looked utterly desolate and forlorn ; the books were gone—the piano, pictures, statues—all those exquisite works of art which the refined and artistic taste of the master's cultured mind had gathered about him had been removed under his or Gabrielle's own supervision. Nothing remained but the elegant furniture, the graceful hangings, and the masses of flowers.

After Sir Arthur bade good-night, and left them, Gabrielle had presently asked Douglas if she should read aloud—she had kept one or two books at hand—she knew well by her own heart that the storm within was but outwardly suppressed, not crushed; ay, more, that a world of anxiety and excitement—a very chaos of feelings—were surging in heart and brain.

“No, thanks, *chère* Gabrielle,” he answered. “I could not attend, I can only think — think — oh, Gabrielle, why does time go on such leaden wings sometimes?”

She turned at that from the window where she had stood, and came to his side. She had noted this hour past how restless he was—scarcely ten minutes in exactly the same position—noted that more than once he put his hand to his head, with a look of utter weariness and pain. She saw even now the passionate movement as he spoke, and the crimsoned flush of excitement on the bronzed cheeks, the bright

glitter in the dark eyes that looked into hers.

“This will not do, *mon ami*,” she said, laying her soft fingers on his brow, “your head is aching, I know,”—how steady the low pathetic tones fell—how the woman’s passionate heart within was beating fast and heavy,—“I shall have you too unwell to-morrow to travel if—”

“Gabrielle! Gabrielle! it is for you—you, for your safety, that I am on the rack, because I am so helpless to save *if* he—”

Her hand on his lips stayed the wild torrent that was such torture, yet such happiness, to hear, which might yet carry one or both too far.

“You must not, shall not rack yourself for me—for my sake you must presently try to sleep. I shall not let you stay here till Harford returns, for Dr Neville said I was not to let you be too late to-night.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts,’” she interposed, with a faint smile; “at eleven I shall wheel you into your dressing-room, and transfer you to the large couch there. You must enforce rest on that aching brain of yours—if only because I wish it.”

Douglas looked at her a moment, and his breast heaved as he turned aside. Was it sin to love that grand-hearted woman as he loved her? Was it shame to her that he knew he held that heart all his own? If it were, was the sin theirs, or on the head of those who had woven such a web?

“You need rest far more than I do,” he said. “I wish I had not let Harford go—or the dog.”

How her very heart echoed the wish! She had never before felt so heavy a feeling of foreboding and dread. But when eleven struck she opened the dressing-room door, and wheeled the chair in, up to the wide, soft couch.

"I have let you sit up too long, I fear," she said, as he sank back amongst the cushions.

"No, you have not. Now leave me, my dear, and go to rest yourself."

"Not yet. I shall be in the next room, for you wont even close your eyes while I am here, you bad boy."

He laughed a little; but instead of leaving him she fetched her eau-de-cologne and bathed his forehead, and wetted the rich clusters of curly locks, passing her hand softly through them as she had done after that accident to the lift; knowing the power that lay in her touch, and under its magic the restless excitement calmed down, leaving the pain and weariness to assert their sway; the hand that had clasped hers relaxed its hold, the long silky lashes drooped, the dark eyes closed, and Douglas Glen-Luna sank, first into an uneasy, restless slumber, then—rare thing for him—into a deep sleep, unconscious even of the form

that bent over him for a moment—of the prayer that went up.

“Let me die for him if need be, but, O Father above, not him! not him!” Then Gabrielle closed the windows—for it had grown chill enough now—and passing into the *salon* shut the inner door and both those windows, too, and then threw herself on the sofa and buried her face.

“Oh, Douglas, Douglas! I am vanquished utterly! Sin, shame, misery, it must be; but this broken heart can only love thee for ever and for ever.”

Crushed by the weight that lay on her, worn out by anxiety and suffering, she lay there like a stricken thing until at last, unawares, sorrow and weariness joined hands with oblivion and stole upon her heavily—it might have been for an hour, it might have been more, perhaps; but at last there came into her troubled sleep—if such it could be called—a painful weight as of a hand pressed over her breast, impeding breathing, a vague

darkened dream, a great noise in her ears like the hum of thousands and thousands of bees, and the baying of a dog through all. She struggled, moved, flung out her arms, and, with such a smothered cry as had never escaped her before, sprang to her feet ; no dream or fancy ! The dog Angus was scratching and baying madly at the door giving on to the corridor, and the room was filling with smoke that came curling in, it seemed, at every corner and aperture. The next second her hand was on the door, wrenching it wide, to be almost beaten back for one moment by black volumes of smoke that rushed in with the faithful animal, whose frantic baying had awoke her.

“ My God ! the building is on fire ! ” A thousand lives of agony seemed crowded into those next few moments ! Above, below, near, far, the awful roar was in her ears, in the air, in the blinding smoke, through which tongues of flame leaped up at the far end of the long corridor. One

thought only filled the heart and brain that never for one second lost their power, but rather rose up suddenly stronger a hundred-fold—Douglas—that helpless form within the inner room. Close to the door the alarm-bell hung ; she stepped outside, holding her breath against the choking smoke, and seized the thick silk cord in a grasp like a man's ! One desperate pull—one heavy stroke from the great alarm-bell above the roof—and the cord came rattling down to the floor, cut through higher up.

“Angus—thy master !”

Back to the inner door, into the room. Merciful Heaven ! it was full of smoke—the floor, the further wall—the very air all heated ; but she felt, knew, saw nothing but that one loved, helpless form, half lifted now on the couch with wide-open eyes, as she sprang to his side—all barriers gone—forgotten in that awful moment on the brink of a terrible death.

“Douglas ! Douglas ! for God's sake

come—there is time to save you ! they have fired the rooms below and the flames are upon us—”

In that cry all the woman's passionate love went out to him ; in his answer, spoke the whole wealth of the man's as he stretched out one arm to try and put her back.

“ There is death in every second's delay. Leave me ! Save yourself while there is yet time ! Leave me, I say, Gabrielle ! I can die ; but, Holy Heaven ! I *cannot* see thee perish for me, my one love, my heart's life ! ”

“ I will live or perish with you, I swear by that God who alone can give me strength to save us both ! ” she said, grasping the arm he had put out with a strength that was a man's, not a woman's. “ Stand up ! into the chair, or I will lift you. I will *not* leave you. Do you hear that crash ? ”

The flooring of Harford's room behind had given way, and an absolute rush of roaring

as the flames leaped up through the gap they had made. Douglas in that moment had raised himself, resting on her shoulder, and stepped into the chair.

“ On, Angus, Gabrielle ! Oh, my darling, you should have escaped ; but now—”

In under the further door the smoke poured, and, as Gabrielle wheeled the chair through the *salon*, the flooring of the dressing-room buckled, cracked, and fell in with a roar like thunder.

On, on now ! the fire is gaining on them every half-second ; the flames seem bursting through everywhere ! They are coming on behind as they gain the corridor—leaping up, licking the walls, as if they were reveling like mad devils on the hideous work they did—wrapping the floor of the corridor step by step in its rapid advance, as it burst through the oaken boards ; the heat almost scorches the fugitives, and Gabrielle glances behind ; the dog has reached the wide stone staircase in which lies her only hope. If life

were to last a thousand years they could never forget that awful moment.

“Gabrielle, my heart, leave me! You cannot get this chair down those stairs! The flames below are almost licking the balustrade; your strength—”

“Can save you or die with you. Hold fast,” came the answer, as the firm hands grasped the handle like a vice and drove the chair to the stairhead.

On! on! behind roared those merciless flames, roaring, thirsting for those two lives! Onward went that noble woman, down the stairway, step by step, keeping the chair on its two back wheels, the guiding-wheel in mid-air, with a strength that surely God gives to some in such moments, never for one second losing her steady calm, her perfect presence of mind, though every moment some falling beam or crash behind might well have made the boldest quail. Now the dense volumes of smoke envelop them, and a new tongue of flame leaps up to

her left, while those behind seem almost to reach and scorch her dress ; seem, she cannot, dare not, look back now, but sets her teeth and moves still onward ; hurry she cannot, or she might precipitate her precious charge below. Have the flames reached the head of the staircase yet—wrapped the massive stanchions which support them at the top ? They must by this time—they must be burning now. God of mercy ! is that hall-door below closed ? is there no help near, within or without ? Are those distant shouts and cries that come to their ears through all the frightful roar of the fire ? Is that a woman's shriek, somewhere far below, it seemed ? Is that other a human yell, a man's frantic shriek of despair, crying that the shutter bar has fallen, and he cannot escape ? Do they dream all this in those few awful minutes on that stairway, or is it all a hideous reality ? Ha ! another crash—the dog utters a yell of terror and dashes forward—he has kept a step ahead

till now—a rush of blessed fresh air comes up through all the fierce heat—she gains the last few stairs, reaches the hall—the open hall-door—hears a roar—a crash like a thousand thunders behind as the whole staircase falls into the seething flames that seize their prey, hears a strange hum and cries—sees, as in a dream, the fire-engines and a surging crowd, a fierce glare of light, and dear familiar faces—Harford, and Sir Arthur, hear Chandos Neville’s—“God be thanked! Douglas is saved!” and the fearful tension, the desperate strength, gives way; she hears a wild cheer—knows that Harford takes the chair from her—and then all is sudden darkness. Neville lifts her, in a dead swoon, in his arms, and bears her away after Harford and the man she has saved.

Play the engines, but keep back the crowd; let not the boldest go near the burning pile, which no mortal hand can save; for inside and out the west wing is

blazing, the flames are leaping higher and higher—they crash the glasses, the windows fall in—they wrap the wall, mount to the roof, laughing disdain at the columns of water, that can save the rest, but not rob them of their prey.

Ha! hark to that! A roar like a whole park of artillery—and the crowd gives out a shout—a yell of wild excitement—as the whole roof comes crashing in on the seething mass below. They may get the fire under now, perhaps; it has done its work of destruction, and of God's own vengeance—though no one knows that yet; no one knows for an hour or more that of those who have done this awful deed one is lying scorched and senseless in the corridor, to which, barely escaping, she had dragged her burnt, maimed limbs; and the other—ah, who but that Heaven he had dared so long saw that frantic being blinded with the smoke, scorched with the flames, beating in fierce despair against the

shuttered windows and door he could not find—who heard that maddened cry as the blazing pile came crashing down—down? Only He who hath said once and for all time,—

“Vengeance is mine : I will repay.”





CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER THE FIRE.

“**S**HE is coming round at last, Rose ; and I must go back to Lady Glen-Luna. You had better tell her, dear.”

As one hears voices and words in a dream, so those words reached Gabrielle Albany's ear as the door closed behind the physician ; and she started half up on the sofa on which they had laid her—started up with a wild, dazed look in her large, dark eyes for a moment, and hurried words.

“Tell me what ? Tell me the truth, Rose. Douglas—where is he ?”

“My darling, safe and well in the next

room to this." Sister Rose bent over her directly. "He has been attended to well, and Harford and Sir Arthur are with him. You shall go to him presently, but first—"

"Yes; tell me, tell me," Gabrielle interrupted, but she shivered from head to foot, and put her hand to her brow as if to shut out some terrible sight, "why has your brother gone back to Lady Glen-Luna? Oh, Rose! oh, Rose! I heard such a shriek below!—then another!—a cry!—a man's cry! Oh, Rose; shall we ever get this night out of our sight and hearing?" She cowered down on the cushions with a strong shudder. "Was it long ago? Have I been here long?"

"A long, long time, my dear." The sweet voice shook beyond her power to steady—the end she had to tell was such a terrible retribution. Mrs Albany raised herself again.

"I am quite myself, Rose," she said slowly; "there is too much to be borne and done for me to give way more than once.

It is in your face. Why has Dr Neville gone to Lady Glen-Luna?"

"Because," said Rose Neville, pressing her hands against her breast, "she was found lying in the corridor leading from the west wing hall to the main building—lying there senseless—and—and—so frightfully burnt—so maimed and injured, that Chandos says she cannot live many hours. Hyacinth and Lady Constance are with her, but when her mother broke into raving, Jessie was carried out fainting, and Chandos sent Sir Arthur away. We must spare him, if possible, the fearful revelations her ravings make!"

"Go on," said Gabrielle hoarsely; "I know what those revelations are. Where is the other?"

Rose put her hand on Mrs Albany's shoulder, struggling to steady her own agitation.

"My child, his sin has overtaken him in its midst. That cry you heard must

have been his. The firemen found in the ruins the remains—burnt, crushed—”

“Oh, my God!”

She covered her face and buried it in the cushions, so still for a long time that it scarcely seemed as if she even breathed! But, oh, who but heaven could know the wild tempest of contending emotions that swept and racked the woman's soul in those minutes of outward stillness—horror at his crowning deed and fearful fate—a stern sense of its just vengeance—bitterness; but not one flash, not one memory that could stir the most momentary regret that her bondage was snapped asunder—only above and through all the wild, passionate sense, that she was free—free at last!—that Douglas Glen-Luna's bitter foes were swept away.

Her first words was a whispered question.

“Does Douglas know?”

“All, my poor child; they all know.”

‘Where are we, Rose?’

“In the east wing.”

Gabrielle rose up, walked to the end of the room, and came back.

“And where is—is the dead man?”

“They have taken him to the lodge, my dear. There is Harford at the door again.”

Gabrielle opened it herself, and faced the courier. The next moment her two hands were closed in his, and his face was bowed on them. It was minutes before either mistress or servant could speak, and then Harford's voice was almost a whisper.

“Will you see him now? Sir Arthur has just gone up again to his wife's room.”

Daylight coming on without looked in on haggard, ghastly faces; but she passed out at once, and stole to the next room. The first meeting must come, and why not now?

Douglas was lying on a sofa, and the faithful dog who had warned them of the danger sat with his head laid on his

master's feet, only whining and wagging his tail as his mistress entered. Ah, poor heart! she had meant to be so brave, so calm, so controlled—to forget the words that both had uttered when the world seemed lost,—but for both, their strength had reached its tether of control.

The light flashed up in those, deep, grey eyes—her name to his lips.

“Gabrielle! My preserver! My heart!” The next moment she was kneeling at his side, her slight form locked in his arms, her face hidden in his breast, with such deep convulsive weeping as no control or tenderest soothing could arrest for many minutes. Nature herself had at last asserted her power against all the long months—yes, years—of suffering and self-suppression, and would not be said nay.

He made no effort to check them, knowing that it was best so, but only, with the exquisite tact and infinite tenderness of his great love, soothed by touch of his hand—

of his lips to her brow, as she presently lay still and exhausted on his breast—the touch that was no sin now, the noble heart on which she might alone rest now and for ever.

“After all that has passed, my darling,” his soft voice came at last, “it is better for us both, in the position we must hold yet for many months—to put aside the feeling that would have sway, and understand each other at once. I loved you almost before I knew it, Gabrielle, and then—then—God be my witness how I fought against it, and how could I—I could not send you from me back into the cold, wide world to suffer yet more, and if I had you would have read my secret—”

“Not yours alone for long, *mon cœur*,” she whispered, without moving; “I read it all too soon by my own heart. How could I help loving *you* when—when you were—oh, Douglas, Douglas! God forgive me! I was but a human being.”

“Hush, my heart! that is passed, and the future is to come. I may hold you now to this heart, mine for ever, my wife—and for your sake and mine this must at once be understood between us, painful as it is to speak of at such a time as this; but, sweetheart, your position to me, and even more when we go abroad, would be unbearable for you—ay, for us both, unless it is understood between us, and those dear ones who are with us, that you are my promised wife, to be wedded as soon as I can walk from the door of a church to its altar. To the world without still my attendant, but to us—heart’s dearest, am I not right?” A low whispered “Yes,” as she lifted her face to his for a moment, and then on those dear lips Douglas pressed one long, passionate kiss, sealing her his own for ever.

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And in that room above the woman who had wrought so dark a deed lies dying in

such frightful agony that Horror itself shrank back before Pity; a sight as fearful to look upon as for ear to hear her ravings. Then had come the stupor of exhaustion and torture, in which Chandos had just returned for a few minutes to his other charges. When he got back the wretched sufferer was raving again, and the first intelligible words they caught were for the last person they would have thought.

“Fetch that handsome woman who said he was her husband. I will see Mrs. Albany! I will! I will, I tell you. Hasn't the fire that's burning here—here, burnt up her and Douglas! Some one said she saved him, curse her! Fetch her, you, then, Hyacinth! Ha! don't look at your lover, girl, I will see her.”

“Fetch Mrs Albany, Hyacinth,” said Neville quietly. “Lady Constance, will you kindly replace this bandage while I hold her? Hush, Lady Glen-Luna, I must hold you,” for she had struggled in her delirium.

“ I won’t have Jessie here, mind you ; or Arthur, or—take the fire away ! it’s burning my brain out, and here ! the bed is on fire and Clifford is sneering. She was his mistress—not his wife—no, no. Ha ! she comes to taunt me, too, with that mocking scorn of hers.”

Into the room came Gabrielle Albany, glanced from the mother and daughter—who followed her in—to the physician, and advanced without a change of face that could betray how startled she was at the sight before her ; scarcely recognisable for the once pretty little Adeline Glen-Luna.

“ You sent for me, Lady Glen-Luna,” said the mellow tones, gently, “ what can I do for you ? ”

The glittering eyes stared up in that beautiful face with a fierce glare that seemed half of sanity, half delirium.

“ Do ! I want to ask you some questions I—” Neville touched Lady Constance and signed to Hyacinth with a quick, quiet—

“Will you kindly see how Miss Glen-Luna is now?” Whatever the dying woman might say he dared not leave her.

“Ha!” she cried out, “do you think they don’t know what it all means? Look you, Mrs Albany, do you know why I put you, with all your beauty and fascination, with Douglas Glen-Luna?”

She knew now what was coming, and as if—Chandos felt—in mute and touching appeal to his chivalrous feeling, she rested one hand heavily on his shoulder as he sat by the bedside, and answered,—

“I know.”

“Ha! I reckoned well, then; at any rate you know he loved you—loves you now—will love you, and break his heart for you to the end of his miserable, crippled life—you—another man’s wife—”

“Heaven! this is too much,” muttered Neville, starting, but her voice stayed him.

“I know that.”

“Ha! And you love him! you love him! You dare not deny it—in shame and misery you love him—you, Leicester Albany’s wife!”

The blood flushed over the proud, statuesque face, but left it instantly; her answer came sternly—slowly,—

“I loved Douglas when it was sin—I love him now when the chain is broken. Leicester Albany lies dead, burned, crushed beneath the ruins of the building his hands had fired.”

“Dead! dead!” Such a shriek of baffled fury rang out as made even those two shrink. “It is false! false! You will tell me next that you suspected me all through, as he declared, and that the man who takes my Jessie’s inheritance will be again all he was, to mock me!”

“He will,” said Neville, speaking for the first time, and putting his hand on her to keep her down in her frantic rage; “all these months he has been under my care,

and will recover entirely. Lady Glen-Luna, for pity's sake, put aside all such—"

She interrupted him with fierce raving once more, in which all her hatred of Douglas and Gabrielle blazed forth. She saw now, she cried, how that woman had acted a part and played her false from the first—and won life and strength for Douglas—and he would wed her, while she was in torture! And then the strength of mad delirium gave way again suddenly, and she sank down groaning in agony that no medical aid could assuage, which the marred form did not lose even in the sort of stupor that followed.

"You must have rest, Gabrielle," said Chandos. "Go back to Douglas, and send Rose and Sir Arthur. Poor old man! if we can only keep her share in this tragedy from him!"

"Shall I send her daughter?" Mrs Albany asked, pausing.

"She should be here," he answered;

“she is sinking fast ; she will never speak again.”

Gabrielle left the room, but just outside Hyacinth was waiting, and she sent her to Jessie, while she herself went back to Douglas and his father.

How haggard and stricken the poor old baronet looked now ; how her heart ached as she gave her message. It was the first time they had met since the fire, and, trying to speak, the father broke quite down ; he could only put his arms about her, and, bowing his grey head on her shoulder, with one choking sob mutter broken words.

“I know all—you have saved my only son. I have no words, my child, my daughter.”

And then he went out—up to the chamber of death above—for she died in that stupor an hour later, and never spoke again.

So in trouble and sorrow the sun uprose

once more on the world, and the soft breeze rustled the leaves, and the birds sang in the lofty woods as blithely as if there were no ruins and death in the earth that God had made so fair.





CHAPTER XIX.

AWAY ABROAD.

ONLY a blackened mass of smouldering ruins where yesterday the west wing had stood ; but, happily perhaps for all, there was such absolute need for instant action, so much to be done, that there was, after very necessary refreshment and a couple of hours' rest, no time to think.

For every reason it was, of course, now impossible for the travellers to leave for some days, and, in a brief consultation held between Sir Arthur—who bore his grief like the noble gentleman he was—his son, and Dr Neville and Mrs Albany, arrangements

were agreed upon. Telegrams were at once sent off to the master of the yacht with orders to be ready, as they would be all on board in a few days, and to Sir Arthur's lawyer, who, in reply, was down by twelve o'clock. The funeral of Lady Glen-Luna was then fixed for Saturday morning, and late that (Thursday) afternoon the inquest was held on all that remained of the once dashing "Clifford Brandon," for by agreement the real identity was not revealed. He was identified as Clifford Brandon by Sir Arthur and Chandos Neville. The wife he had so foully wronged never saw him at all, and that night the coffin was, under the lawyer, Mr. Grey's, superintendence, removed to London, and interred in a London cemetery. But on that coffin, and subsequently on the plain slab that marked the spot, the name of Leicester Albany was placed, with the date of his death. So his evil life passed out, and the place that knew him knew him no more.

Kind Lady Saltoun telegraphed the moment she heard the sad news for Jessie to be sent to them at once, and, as the poor girl was now really ill, her father and brother gratefully accepted the friendly invitation, and sent her away at once with Howell, the maid.

In Doring, and, indeed, elsewhere, gossip about the cause of the fire was rampant; but though Lady Glen-Luna's guilt remained a secret with those few who had heard her ravings, it was impossible to conceal Clifford Brandon's part in the crime, the motive being easily supplied by the late events regarding his marriage with Miss Glen-Luna; of course it was revenge, and the intention had been to burn the whole of the old Hall; and poor, dear Lady Glen-Luna had been burned in trying to warn those in the west wing. Is it not bitterly true that truth lies at the bottom of a well? —a very deep well, too.

In all this trouble, Hyacinth and her

mother, as well as the two Nevilles, were invaluable, and Lady Constance was so softened towards Chandos, so moved by his quiet devotion, that she veered right round, like a good vessel brought up sharp into the wind's eye, and struck her colours to her daughter's lover. She told him so, frankly and earnestly, on that Sunday morning as they walked back from St Agnes the Martyr's. It scarcely, she said, with tears in her eyes, seemed a time perhaps to speak of marrying and giving in marriage, but she had been so wrong, so mistaken, that she could not let them part so for many months; he should leave England as Hyacinth's affianced husband, and claim her whenever he returned. Such a brother and friend she knew could only be a true and noble husband to the woman he loved.

So another "curse of Kehama" was turned into a blessing.

That day also it was settled that the travellers—now, of course, with Sir Arthur

added to their party—must leave on Tuesday, the physician speaking very decidedly on the point, with a meaning glance at Douglas and his attendant. They had gone through so much that entire change was an immediate necessity, even if there had been, as before, proper accommodation for Douglas. The removal of the ruins and all else was left in Mr. Grey's charge. The rebuilding of the west wing should be attended to later.

"And when we come back, Mr. Douglas," said Harford, the morning they left, "my long, deepest wish will be fulfilled, I know, as much as your father's."

"What is that, Harford?"

The courier touched Gabrielle Albany, and answered quietly,—

"That this noble woman should be your wife; she is good enough even for you."

"Oh, Harford, Harford! It is I that am not half worthy of her."

Harford smiled and stooped to pat the

dog. "I wonder what Madame Gabrielle thinks," he said; he had never called her "Mrs. Albany" since the fire, when he could possibly avoid it, and Gabrielle shook her head with a half sad smile; nothing in her eyes was half good enough for Douglas Glen-Luna.

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So they travelled to London, and Lady Constance and Hyacinth Lee accompanied them right on board the beautiful yacht and down the river to the Nore. Then the parting came, but oh, how different to what it would have been! And Gabrielle, standing beside Glen-Luna's chair on the poop, said, as they watched the little boat take the Lees ashore,—

"Douglas, do you remember your words that night, 'When I leave these rooms, whether I live or die, I shall never come back to them, never, never'?"

"Ay, sweetheart; I little dreamed how terribly they were to be fulfilled. Ah, here

comes the dear old father. Is not this my dream, too, Gabrielle, over the blue ocean with you at my side—mine?"

"Surely, yes."

And then they shut off steam, and, with a fair wind full in her quarter, the yacht spread her white wings and stood out to sea.

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So the weeks and months passed by, and letters came frequently from the tenants of the villa at the beautiful old German spa; and news that confirmed Chandos Neville's medical expectation, that his patient would—had, in fact—reached a certain point, and would take a sudden leap, as it were, to recovery.

"I am letting Douglas try his paces cautiously, dear Hyacinth," her lover wrote, a month after their arrival in the Vaterland, "and with each trial, each day, he gains beyond my utmost hopes; of course, I had been preparing him for it for five months at Luna Park. In a few days he

will walk the length of the room just leaning on Gabrielle's shoulder, always on her; it is touching to see that sight, Hyacinth." Later on he wrote,—

"While I write this Douglas and Gabrielle are slowly walking under the verandah—his light, firm step as of old, Harford says. I believe if the truth were known, that man thanks God every morning and night for that fire."

"And so do I," muttered Hyacinth, defiantly. "I'm sure they all must in their secret hearts. What more does my old dear say?"

"We had a letter from Jessie and kind Lady Saltoun, from which we gather that Fred Saltoun has taken a fancy to Miss Glen-Luna. It would be the best possible thing for all parties, I am sure. Sir Arthur is delighted, and Douglas smiles oddly and strokes his silky moustache as he says, '*Ach, ja wohl!*'"

So the months roll on into the past.



CHAPTER XX.

THE TALES OF OUR TRAVELLERS ARE FINISHED
AT LAST.

“**L**ETTERS from England, Sir
Arthur.”

Harford came out into the verandah of the villa, from the lovely gardens of which there is such a view of the quaint old German town, and fine scenery bathed now in the glorious midsummer sun. The baronet, Sister Rose—dear Sister Rose *sans épine*, with her sweet face and tender smile, were seated on a pretty bamboo bench, Chandos Neville leaning against a marble vase close by looking through the *Tageblatt*.

"Letters!" exclaimed Sir Arthur eagerly, "who for, Harford?—who for?"

"Four for you, Sir Arthur," handing them from the salver, "two for Miss Rose, half-a-dozen for you, sir, as usual," added Harford, smiling respectfully as Chandos laughed, "and several for the master and Mrs Glen-Luna."

"Where on earth have they got to, Harford? I heard my boy's voice long ago on the lawn, talking to Angus. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I suppose he has taken off his wife for a walk before breakfast again, and he'll overdo it; eh, Chandos?"

The physician smiled and shook his head.

"Not now, Sir Arthur, it is full nine months since we left England."

"And five since their marriage," added Sister Rose; "doesn't the time fly fast?"

"There they are, all three!" said Neville, pointing towards the broad high-road leading down into the town.

They saw them plainly, dog and mistress

and master, lost for a few minutes behind the trees, and then the gate below the lawn opened, Angus bounded forwards, and they hear the soft, sweet tone—

“Not tired one bit, sweetheart; how could I be, with thee at my side?”

And then the tall, graceful form we have seen so helpless comes swinging up the lawn with a light, firm tread, and a new light in the handsome face, as he bends to whisper some lover-like word to the beautiful woman at his side that makes her smile and colour too, and then as he bounds forward like a deer to his father's side, revelling in his regained strength, the tears fill her eyes and her lips quiver. To her there is an intense pathos in that very revelling, for in it lies the retrospect, the story of his past sufferings.

“I am so sorry we are late, dear father,” she said, tenderly kissing the old man's forehead, “but you must not scold my husband.”

“I think we won’t scold anyone,” said gentle Sister Rose, “but have some breakfast, and read our letters.”

“Sister Rose, thou hast the right always,” said Douglas, offering her his hand to lead her within the sunny room, and Gabrielle Glen-Luna added wickedly,—

“Sister Rose knows that some one has a letter from the sweetest Hyacinth that ever grew.”

“So there is, Mrs Douglas Glen-Luna, in answer to mine, I have no doubt.”

“And look here,” said Sir Arthur, looking brightly up, “here is one from Jessie and young Fred and Sir George Saltoun, all to one point—papa’s consent. What say you, Douglas?”

The words this time were so at once in each mind that Douglas, sitting by his wife, dropped his hand with a tender action on her shoulder as he answered,—

“I say ‘yes,’ father, from my heart.”

“So do I, dear boy, and it will chime in

well with this autocrat's plans," touching Neville; "let's see, what are they exactly, Chandos?"

"Why, Sir Arthur, now that Douglas is out of the wood, I order, as a final safety, a yachting cruise for three months, then travel till the spring in all the warm corners of the Continent they like."

"And then?" said Douglas.

"Why, bring that beautiful wife of yours home to take the London world by storm, Mr Impudence, and yourself, too."

"And fulfil your promise *in toto*."

"What was that?"

"Well, I drive my blood-horses long since, certainly, M. le Médecin, but you said I should drive Gabrielle on the box-seat of my four-in-hand."

"So you shall, most puissant signor, next season," answered Neville, laughing; "meanwhile, Rose and I will go back, and—"

"Change sweet Hyacinth's name. Oh,

Chandos, it is a shame that you would not let me send you away before this."

"Hush, Douglas; if you only knew the happiness it is to me to see you restored to strength!"

"I think I do know, Chandos," said Douglas, very softly, and clasped the other's hand in his own.

So it was settled, and that Sir Arthur should return to England with them, to be at Jessie's marriage. Parting was a trial; but Sir Arthur, as he clasped Gabrielle in his arms, said,—

"My child, it was of you I thought, of you I hoped, when I said I looked one day to call my son's wife daughter, and hold a son of hers in these old arms."

"Father, I knew that, then."

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There is great rejoicing that next season in the London *beau monde*, for it has recovered not only its former brilliant

favourite, by it seemed almost a miracle of science had gained in his beautiful wife—the heroine of that not-forgotten night—a reigning queen of society; not to know the Glen-Lunas was to argue yourself out of the *élite* circle; not to admire the beauty of their little son a crime, with the ladies; not to have witnessed that meet of the Four-in-Hand Club, when Douglas Glen-Luna, with his most magnificent team of thorough-breds in hand, and his beautiful wife at his side, led off, was to have missed a sight indeed—not to know them and the matchless Arabs they rode was simply to admit that you did not live, but merely existed. Even lovely Mrs Neville (*née* Lee), wife to the well-known physician, shone a secondary light beside Mrs Glen-Luna.

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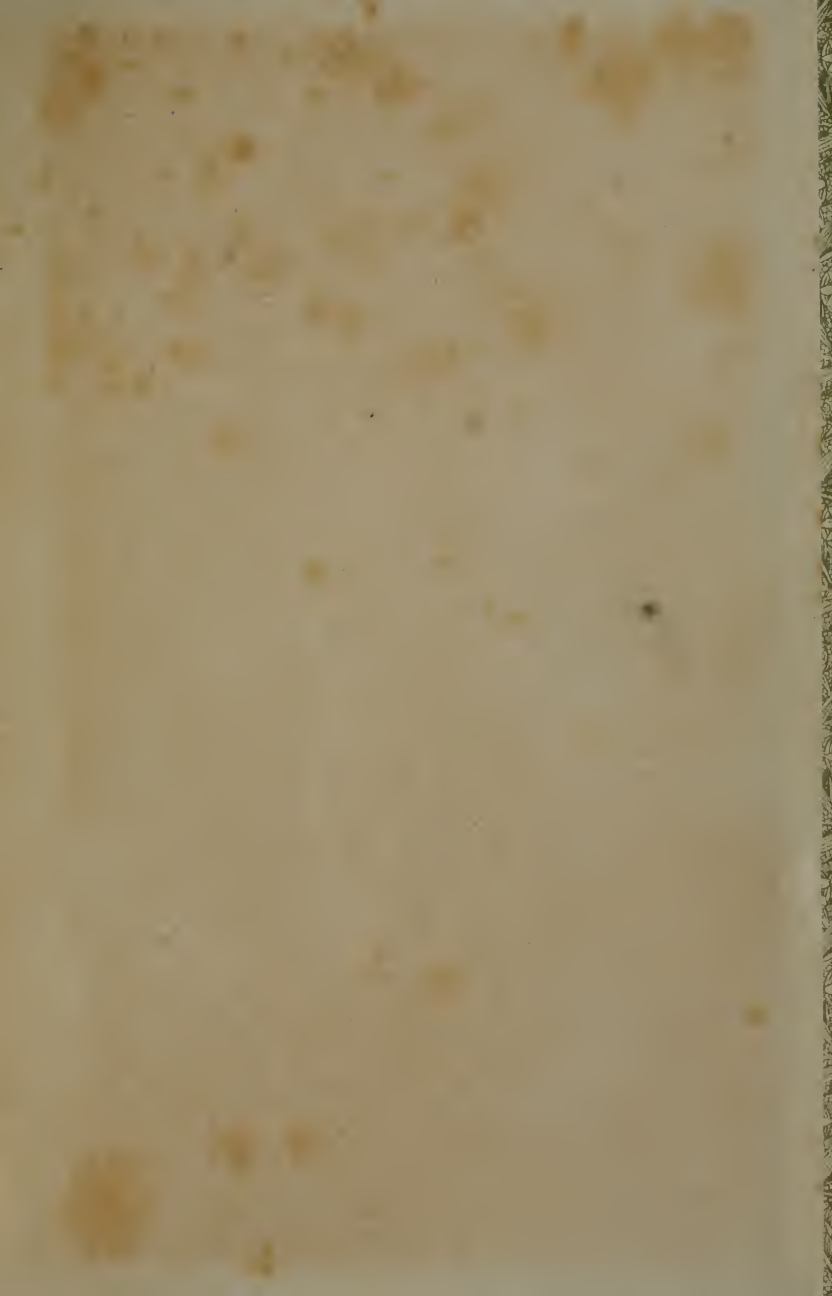
One more picture! of a rich, golden autumn day, and a noble park and a

stately old hall rising up amongst the forest giants, and looking as if the ancestral walls could smile on the fine west wing that had risen up where the fire had laid waste ; of a grey-haired old man welcoming a gay party of guests that are gathered in the ancestral halls, and a faithful servant who stands near him proudly holding his master's little son in his arms, as he watches them all as if in a dream. Sweet Sister Rose, who has a smile for each and all, and carries "Peace on earth" in golden letters on her pure brow ; Chandos Neville and Hyacinth, more saucy than ever as she looks at her mother and laughs ; and last, but not least, the noble dog, and beside him, brilliant, handsome Douglas Glen-Luna, and the wife he loves so passionately, so deeply, whose smile is to him more than all the world.

"Ah, darling wife, heart of my heart," he whispers, drawing her to his breast,

when for a minute they are alone, "if we must sometimes look back, let it be only to know to our heart's core that, hand in hand, and heart linked to heart, we tread no more on dangerous ground."

THE END.







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